#17 December 2002

borderline

The Comics Magazine

$1.00 (week 1)
$2.95 (weeks 2-5)

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John Wagner, the creator of Judge Dredd
Bryan Talbot and Andy Diggle on their latest projects for DC

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Each NEW issue is available to download for $1.00 rising eventually to $2.95 from the following URL:
www.borderlinemagazine.co.uk
Back issues are all $1.00 from the following URL:
www.borderlinemagazine.co.uk/backissues.html

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This month's thanks go to: Eric and Arvid - the Rex Mundi boys – for last minute brilliance, John Wagner for finally coming through, Andy Diggle & Jock, Darek Salaty, Joanna Karpowicz - a star of the future without a doubt! But most of all to Joe Spann and Dr Robert "Bro" Russell for what may be the most important feature we've ever run.

Cover by King Jim Campbell, Rex Mundi original cover art by Eric J – It's Tuesdi to Sundi!

In #18: At last Ann Nocenti (if she gets her answers back in time) and Andrew Vachss interviewed, plus more.

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IT'S THAT MAN AGAIN

*Future plans for **Borderline** have been exposed. Phil Hall explains in full to set the record straight!*

THERE are not as many of you reading this as there once were. I couldn't have expected anything better, to be honest. But, there're enough of you to warrant us still existing, so well done you! ☺

We've been in the news – as is often the case, for all the wrong reasons. Former **Borderline** contributor Rich Johnston broke a story recently, in his Comic Book Resources column *Lying in the Gutter*, which appears to have created something of a storm.

My intention had always been to announce the next major step in **Borderline**'s evolution in this very column, this month. But it seems that everyone knows about it now and more importantly they were more interested in an offshoot of the main story – isn't that just so Internet?

I was going to trumpet the imminent arrival of Borderline Comics and now I have to offer explanations instead…

A good friend of mine and former **Borderline** associate emailed me and asked: "I take it you're doing this **Marvelman** thing out of spite?" That hurt, mainly because I knew at the time that people were going to think this. I just didn't expect a friend to accuse me of it almost immediately after the story broke. But first, let me explain how all of this came about.

There has been a forum/list/group in operation for almost four years now. It has undergone a few name and address changes and is currently here – *http://groups.yahoo.com/group/comics_unintentional/* – and it has over 300 regular members, of which about a fifth post regularly at any specific time. It's had over a thousand comics fan members at various stages of its life and a fair few established comics pros including Bendis, Gibbons and Collins. The point I'm trying to make is, we've met a lot of people over the years and many of them have become our friends. One of these people claimed they could gain us access to Len Miller's niece, who, allegedly, has inherited the ownership and rights of her uncle's publishing company and therefore a lot of the stuff he published. We figured that, part of it being **Marvelman** and a controversial character, we should pursue her and find out if we could do anything. Let's leave this story there for a moment and move on.

Borderline Comics came out of a conversation I had with someone about on-line archiving of comics material.

In reality PDF comics, or comics as pay web pages, have cut out the middleman. You see, with a creator-owned property the creator gets very little. When their comic is a back issue they get nothing extra. So even if it is a hot book and a retailer is selling it for 50 times its original value, it is understood that as the retailer has essentially gambled on the success of said comic, he's entitled to his share of the spoils from it, over and above his normal new comic mark up. Not with downloadable comics. If downloadable comics are a success it will effectively kill the already dwindling back issues market once and for all. Major comics publishers don't actually give a hoot about a comic once the orders are in - seriously, do you think Marvel gave a shit about the estimated 8% of all retailers who went out of business during the summer of 1991? Even though that 8% was probably the difference between the industry continuing to sensibly grow and it ballooning far too fast and out of control…

In all probability, if I started up an on-line comics company and was PDFing my huge Silver Age **Superman** collection and charging a dollar a time for people to look at them, DC would sue the arse off me faster than you could say "Paul Levitz", but other than the *obvious* legal reasons, what harm does it do? Outside of possibly stopping two or three people from spending 50 bucks on one of their **Archives** collections it might actually encourage people to read new comics (if only to see the level of sophistication they've reached in 40 years). In fact DC and Marvel have published *so* many comics in the last 40 years that they couldn't possibly reprint them all. Marvel cancelled a **Tomb of Dracula Essentials** because Joey Q was worried that the company might be embarrassed by the orders. If they'd done it as a full colour PDF or online comic they could make almost free money. There'd be no printers involved, and especially no pesky retailers who might get a double hit when customers start buying those old **Dracula** comics at 5 bucks a throw (the ones that have sat out in the back office for 15 years for 10 cents a pop).

An Italian reprint of the original Marvelman comic. They're welcome to him!

But I'm moving away from the point. Borderline Comics evolved from all of the above. I know a bunch of creators who own their material, would like to be able to at least *try* and make some more money from it, and have no real way of doing that. How can Creator A justify self-publishing a 6-part series he did for Epic if he can't guarantee enough orders to cover his print and PR bill? He can't, so he doesn't and the 1,000 people who would gladly have forked over $15.00 don't – they go somewhere else and spend the money. Borderline Comics gives these creators the chance to earn some money, while being housed by a publisher who is more concerned with covering costs than with driving posh Jaguars.

So, Borderline Comics was born. We have the technology. We have the webspace. We feel there is a need for this service and we want to put the creators' interests first and foremost. Unlike some, we're not planning on taking a huge amount of commission and ultimately our goal is to rejoin the "real" world and turn Borderline Comics into a print reality – so that technophobes can feel the benefit as well! ☺

So what about **Marvelman**?

To be honest, I grew sick and tired of the entire **Marvelman/Miracleman** farrago years ago. But a new company needs ways of generating publicity and what better way than with a character that generates controversy whenever it's mentioned? However, an old friend of mine once talked about the curse of **Marvelman** and that curse has struck again. We're not going to be following our line of enquiries. In fact, **Marvelman** isn't coming anywhere near Borderline Comics. It's been made clear to the team that to go that route would spell "bad news" for me, specifically, and mine. I'm not running away from something, I'm just trying to maintain a vacuum.

But, you must watch out for Borderline Comics in 2003. Whatever we end up publishing it will be a high *quality* product.

FREEDOM FIGHTERS

DR. ROBERT RUSSELL INTERVIEWED

Perhaps you think of editorial cartooning for newspapers as being something cosy and institutional, like the much-loved cartoons Carl Giles produced for the British ***Daily Express*** *for decades, or even like Steve Bell's occasional adaptations of old masters for* ***The Guardian****. Perhaps you know of the trouble and harassment American cartoonist Thomas Nast received from the corrupt New York political machine he satirised during the 1870s, but conclude that no-one makes such a fuss about newspaper cartoons nowadays. You'd be wrong.*

In scores of countries around the world newspaper cartoonists are hounded, imprisoned, attacked and murdered for daring to satirise politicians and businessmen in a direct, graphic manner which communicates to the semi-literate far more clearly and powerfully than any prose exposé ever could. In such countries cartoonists have real power and stellar reputations - but they live very dangerously, and may often be despised and unsupported by their professional colleagues.

On behalf of ***Borderline*** *Joe Spann has talked at length with Robert Russell, leading light of the* Cartoonists Rights Network *support organisation, about the power, the position and yet the terrible insecurity of the editorial cartoonists who wage solitary war on oppression and corruption - and about the naked force and appeal of the graphic image when it is used not just for entertainment but for the propagation of ideas.*

We're proud to present the following text - an eye-opening, no-holds-barred piece which may make you think again about what comics and cartoons can really achieve.

CARTOONISTS HAVE RIGHTS TOO

Joe Spann: *I think the best place to start is with the genesis of the CRN and how cartoonists' rights became the focus of your work. How did you become involved with this issue?*

Robert Russell: I have been a career community development and human rights professional, working for more than 35 years in developing countries in Asia and Africa. In this business we are always told, "next year less money, but more productivity." So developers are always on the lookout for cheaper ways of doing more.

As a former art student at Syracuse University, I always appreciated the work of the editorial cartoonists I encountered in the countries I worked in. As I got to know some of these people, and took a look at their life-style, I realized that there was no point in a society where you could find a person with such a vast amount of influence to whom you could pay so little. Editorial cartoonists in Africa and most of Asia are not doing well economically. In Uganda, of the 20 or so active cartoonists only one makes a full time living from it and he is the only one who can afford a car. Meanwhile, there are about 30 magazines, newspapers and journals that use cartoons in every issue.

In most of these countries the editorial cartoonist enjoys a "rock star" popularity: in repressive regimes, the cartoonist can say things the man on the street

would never dare to say in public. To the illiterate who picks up a newspaper on a bus stand bench and "reads" the cartoons, the cartoon becomes a Rorschach test of his or her political awareness.

At the bottom of the food chain in the editorial office, the editorial cartoonist is in a different social and educational world than the rest of the paper's employees. Cartoonists are honored by the public, but can be resented by the others at the paper.

Anyway, when I finally met cartoonist Jiffry Yoonoos in Sri Lanka, I knew my retirement years were booked. He had been beaten within an inch of his life by the "Goon Squad," (the generic enforcers of any political party in power) for his critical cartoons of the then head of state. Jiffry had broken the golden rule of journalism in most of the Third World - never attack the "Big Man." With his arm in a sling, a bandage around his head, and four or five stab wounds in his side, he had been living in the copy room of his paper, thinking that would be the only safe place for him. The Goons wouldn't invade the press to finish him off. He was afraid to meet me, thinking I was a trap to get him out of his "sanctuary".

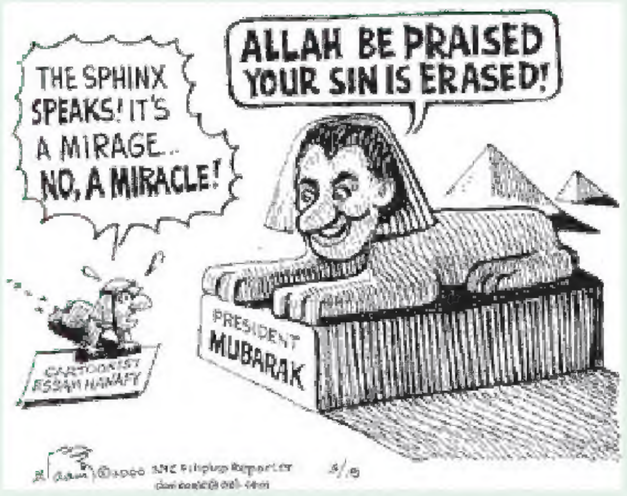
When I asked him what he needed to help him, I expected something like, mount an international protest, get the UN involved, ask the US Ambassador to intervene, organize a letter of protest campaign. Something global. His answer really changed my life. He said, "If I'm killed, make sure my kids' school fees are paid. If I'm arrested, please be sure I have a lawyer. If I'm jailed, be sure my wife and kids have enough to eat while I'm gone. If they beat me again, make sure I get to a hospital."

Since my meeting with Jiffry in 1991, I have been building [the] Cartoonists Rights Network little by little, mostly hand to mouth. One of my lessons has been that the international free speech network blithely ignores editorial cartoonists. Cartoonists exist in a culture separate from the better educated print reporters and editors, and frankly, I think that most training and support organizations in journalism just don't know what to do with cartoonists.

The major free speech organizations - like Committee to Protect Journalists, International Federation of Journalists, Reporters sans Frontiers - all support cartoonists in trouble: cartoonists are, after all, journalists too. But cartoonists in trouble are a very small niche market: their numbers are far less than [those of] investigative or editorial or political journalists in trouble. Cartoonists tend to fall through the cracks. CRN finds maybe 6 to 10 new clients a year in varying degrees of trouble because of their cartoons.

We find the same attitude with the major

Author's Note


THE SPHINX SPEAKS! IT'S A MIRAGE... NO, A MIRACLE!
ALLAH BE PRAISED YOUR SIN IS ERASED!
PRESIDENT MUBARAK
CARTOONIST ESSAM HANAFY

I FIRST heard about Dr. Robert Russell and the Cartoonists Rights Network about two years ago, when he was sending out emails to various cartooning groups in an effort to raise the profile of the CRN and to inform the public about the atrocious treatment of editorial cartoonists around the world. He was also attempting to raise funds by selling the **Art to Die For** portfolio, which featured the work of the cartoonists he was representing.

At the time, I wasn't able to purchase a copy of the portfolio and didn't think that there was much else I could do to help. However, I did save the letter in case I might be able to purchase the portfolio at a later time. It proved to be a fateful decision.

In the early part of 2001, the cartoonist group that I belonged to decided to have an exhibition during Halloween. The group had held shows before and had always donated a portion of its sales to charity, and it was also decided to continue this policy. It was then that I remembered Dr. Russell's letter and suggested that the CRN be the official charity for this show. After a very short debate, it was agreed that the organization would be a perfect choice, especially since the show was going to have a Halloween theme, balancing imagined terrors with those that were all too real.

Dr. Russell was delighted with our decision and was enormously helpful in setting up the CRN's part of the exhibition, which would focus on the work of Essam Hanafy, a cartoonist living in Egypt who had been imprisoned and fined for "disrespecting the Egyptian Government." We were also able to get in direct contact with Essam, who graciously produced a number of works just for the exhibition. Everything was going smoothly.

And then the World Trade Center was destroyed...

...by Middle Eastern terrorists....

...Palestinians were singing and dancing in the streets when they heard the news...

…and we were about to mount an exhibit that featured the work of an Egyptian cartoonist.

Oh yay.

As you might imagine, the situation got a bit tense and there was fear that the show might become a target for anti-Muslim extremists. However, after some intense and occasionally heated discussions the group decided to go ahead and continue with the show as originally planned.

We needn't have worried. The show was well received by the public and the feared backlash never materialized. Still, for those brief, terrible weeks after 9-11, I had a taste of the kind of fear and uncertainty that is the daily lot of any number of cartoonists working around the world. I understood then some of the terror that comes from taking a stand in a potentially dangerous situation, and what fires and motivates human rights activists. I also had to reflect on how bizarre it was to be at risk for mounting a display of funny pictures!

Unfortunately, the local media, perhaps still influenced by the events of 9-11, ignored the exhibition, so publicity was lacking. As a result, we fell far short of the amount we were hoping to raise for the CRN. Still, we were able to raise a few hundred dollars, which was a record-breaker for us, so it wasn't a total loss. I was still disappointed, however, and have continued seeking out ways to get the word out about the CRN and the important work it is doing.

Earlier this year, Phil Hall contacted me and asked if I would be willing to write an obituary for Rand Holmes. It was shortly after doing that piece that I had the thought of conducting an interview with Dr. Russell to appear in **Borderline**. As it turned out, Fearless Phil, our intrepid editor, liked the idea and gave me the go ahead.

The following interview was conducted by email in the Summer and Fall of this year. Be prepared: much of what you will read here is shocking and will forever change how you view editorial cartooning.

Joe Spann – November 15, 2002

journalism foundations. Editorial cartoonists are just not on their agendas. They are a small minority of the editorial room's staff, and they are a breed apart culturally. As important to a readership as the editorial cartoon is, the major foundations seem to be clueless. They don't seem able or willing to connect the dots: readership popularity, strong individual opinions (democracy), important part of subscription numbers. Editors, publishers, journalism training programs, free speech organizations, all realize how powerful a good editorial cartoon is, but they just don't register this when budgeting or planning for journalism support efforts. Most journalism awards do not plan for or even imagine a cartoonist submitting something. My file of "cartoonists not welcome or provided for" is the thickest file in my records system.

Cartoonists are responding to CRN in amazing numbers with outstanding enthusiasm and motivation. CRN now has affiliate organizations in about 12 countries, mostly in the Eastern European region.

JS: *It sounds like you have a pretty rough time getting attention or help from the mainstream media. I can't help but compare that with the recent case of journalist Daniel Pearl, who was murdered in Pakistan. This was a very big story on television and in the newspapers, yet I can't remember ever seeing anything when an editorial cartoonist is threatened, assaulted or killed. Is this indifference confined to the Western media or have you seen it everywhere you've been?*
RR: Compared to investigative journalists like Danny Pearl, few cartoonists are killed in action. The last was Irfan Hussein in India. Just before him (both in 1999) was Muniru Turay in Sierra Leone.

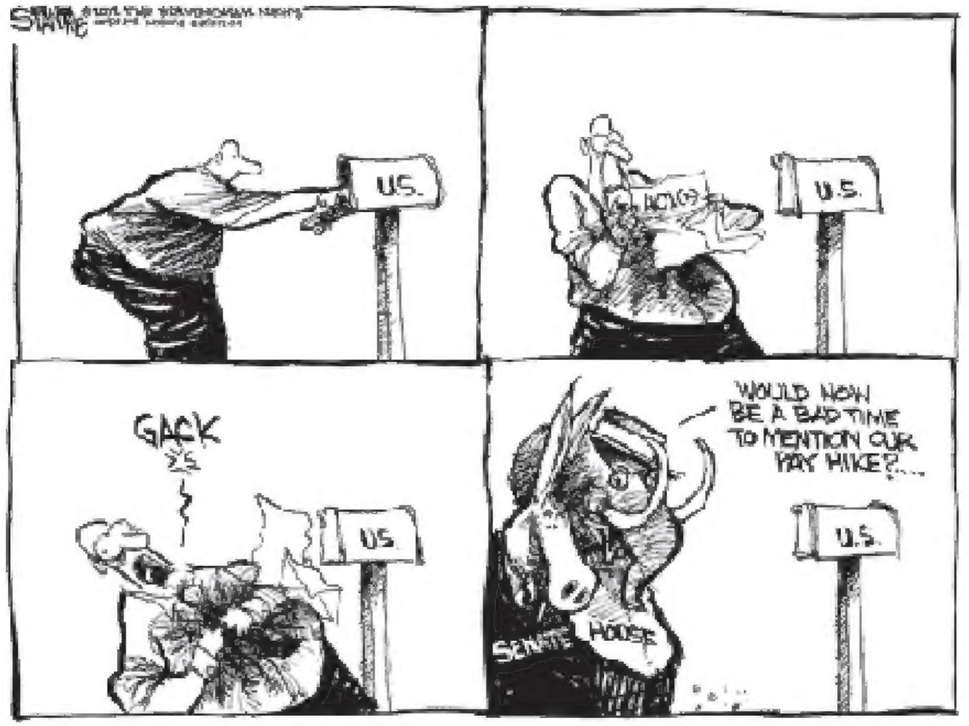
Neither was an employee of a big metropolitan newspaper in New York City. They just weren't news, and they didn't have close friends at the major dailies of the world. Of the journalists killed in Afghanistan, little was reported about them except, for us in the US, the Americans killed.

Frankly, I think our European friends are much more alert to the skills and power of editorial and social cartoonists than Americans. I'm not sure why. Like this interview, I am finding that after 10 years plugging away at the story of cartoonists in trouble, I do feel a slowly growing awareness and interest around the world. I hope part of it at least is due to our dogged persistence in uncovering their stories and getting more and more cartoonists involved in human rights issues.

All the cartoons depicted in this interview are either by persecuted creators or by the sympathisers of those persecuted. For more information see: http://cagle.slate.msn.com/crn/

JS: *When you mentioned cartoonists being killed in action, I couldn't help but think about [UPS cartoonist] Ted Rall's book* ***To Afghanistan and Back*** *in which he related a nearly fatal night-time encounter he had with bandits while he was covering the war there. Those same bandits murdered a video journalist from Sweden later that night. Hearing about episodes like Rall's, as well as about Hussein and Turay, makes me wonder if editorial cartooning is perhaps a more dangerous profession than other types of journalism, proportionally speaking.*

*For example, I know that Rall receives threats on a regular basis. I've also been told that [*Birmingham News, *Alabama cartoonist] Scott Stantis has had threats made against him and his family that were serious enough to warrant police protection. Do you think that editorial cartoonists seem to get more than their fair share of threats? And, if so, why?*
RR: I have long thought that



cartoonists get proportionally more threats than the rest of the journalists. It would take some number crunching to know for sure. Who would know off the top of their heads the ratio of cartoonists to other editorial room denizens? I would think between 30 and 50 to 1. Then we'd look at the total of cartoonists in trouble and get info from [the] Committee to Protect Journalists about the total number of other journalists in trouble at one time. A good afternoon's project.

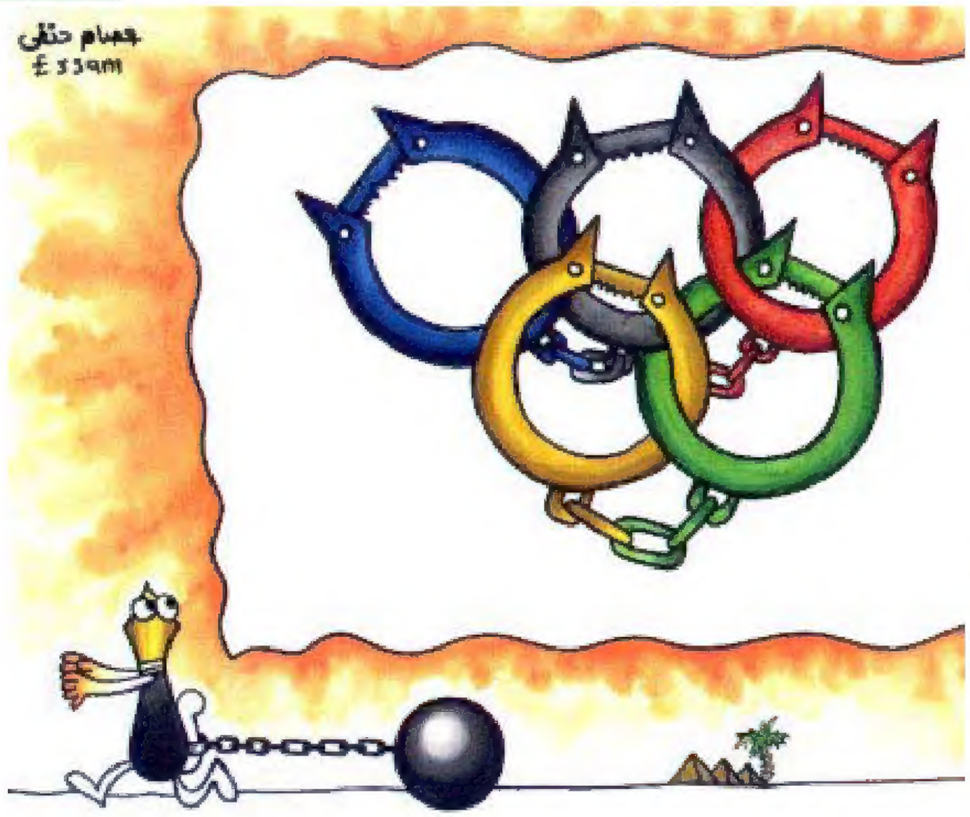
One little gem I'm also interested in is the number of cartoonists on the policy making or selection boards of the major journalism foundations, as well the number and proportion of funded projects for cartoonists in their portfolios.

THE POWER AND THE DANGER

JS: *From what I've been hearing in the last few years, it's become an article of faith among editorial cartoonists that you haven't really "arrived" in the profession until you receive a death threat. It's difficult to wrap one's mind around the idea that people who create funny, satirical drawings about current events consider threats and possible violence as part of their job.*

While I believe it's easy to understand why journalism in general can be a dangerous profession, I think most people find it difficult to understand the level of harassment that the cartoonists often contend with. I think we should discuss some of the reasons for the hostility that their work inspires. Why would a cartoon arouse an individual's or government's bloodlust?
RR: If a death threat has become the ticket for arrival, it may be because cartoonists may not get the kind of feedback they need at a more acceptable level. I'm sure it becomes a mark of achievement, a cartoonist achieves a more rarefied circle: the *really* important cartoonist who risks his or her life for their craft.

Actually, I secretly wish more



Another example of Essam Hanafy's cutting edge cartoons with a dig at the Olympics and Egyptian politics.

cartoonists were in this kind of "threat level" trouble, striking such chords in society that some fight back. Why should investigative reporters have all the fun? If cartoonists were pushing more envelopes harder, we might find editorial cartooning turning itself around: almost every cartoonist, in North America at least, believes cartooning is a dying art. Well, take Bob Marley's sage advice, "Lively up yourself". Carpe Diem.

In protest letters I often tease an Ambassador or Head of State with "it's only a cartoon", or "why get so angry about a little drawing?". Actually, I should keep my mouth shut and give credit where credit is due. I should rather be saying, "Call the goons off or we'll draw another one". Actually, to be fair to the Cartoonists Rights Network's lobbying efforts, that's exactly what we do. Our lobbying booklets are collections of other cartoonists' drawings about the cartoonist in trouble. Take a look at our web site at *www.interplus.ro/smileclub* and see some of them.

Panamanian cartoonist Julio Briceno's response to the charges of defamation leveled against him by one cartoon target was to immediately draw a second cartoon harsher than the first.

Make no mistake, cartoons can be devastating to a person's reputation and career. In Iran, our client is so powerful that all the politicos read the morning paper to see if they are his target that morning. If not, back to business as usual. If they are, they hunker down and wait for the phone to start ringing: they might be a "Consultant with Briefcase" by nightfall.

I think if cartoonists all over the world had greater confidence that they would be protected if attacked or arrested, we would see many more really biting cartoons all over the world, especially in countries where governments or political leaders are jokes to begin with. Cartooning has so much farther to go in elevating its place in the consciousness of the reading public.

Remember, the more fragile and insecure a repressive regime is, the less can be tolerated in the form of criticism. If a head of state depends on a personality cult for the mirrors, pulleys and smoke screens that keep him in power, a publicly humiliating cartoon cannot be tolerated. If a simple lowly cartoonist can level the playing field, what's a poor despot to do? Even if the dictator himself doesn't care, the goons that keep him in power will make sure there is no real criticism. On August 16 this year a cartoonist in Algeria was threatened to the point of having to go underground. The antagonists? TV journalists who were sent to harass him. The cartoon he drew was critical of the fiscal affairs of the State-run TV station.

A very well-respected journalism foundation representative once told me that our request for funds would more than likely go nowhere. One member of the selection committee had once been burned by a cartoonist's pen. On that account no projects for cartoonists had ever passed his veto. Another mid-level staff member of a major journalism training organization in Washington, DC told me that they didn't think about training programs for cartoonists. "We only work with mainstream journalists", she said.

So even within journalism there is an atmosphere that isolates cartoonists from the tribal protections of other journalists. It leaves them vulnerable, isolated. A "soft" target, in the parlance of security wonks.

A written negative investigative report can be spun, lied about, refuted, responded to with counter information, or otherwise managed. A hard hitting cartoon? Once the reader has had the laugh and identified with the message, the target has no recourse. What are they going to do, draw a counter cartoon? The image has been burned in. We are visual animals, we see stereoscopically. We hunt with our eyes. An image remains with us far longer than something we read. Also remember; on the editorial page the writers are reflecting the opinion of the paper. The cartoonist is representing his or her own opinion.

The cartoonist, if they are doing their job well, sticks the neck way out there. They make a hard target to manage, or spin, a target often unprotected from lowlifes and goons.

JS: *I find your comment about editorial cartoonists viewing their profession as a dying craft interesting, because I've been hearing variations on that theme for a number of years. Scott Stantis made an observation during a talk that he gave in Memphis last year that I think has some bearing on that and the journalism profession's refusal to help cartoonists in trouble.*

According to Stantis, newspaper editors tend to be control freaks and want to insure that all of their publication's content reflect their personal views. However, syndicated editorial cartoons fall outside of their control. It kills their souls when readers fail to respond to articles but go nuts over a cartoon.

The reverse of that, according to other editorial cartoonists I have spoken to, is that when a newspaper can afford to have its own cartoonist, the editor often refuses to allow him any autonomy. He or she will even attempt to force the cartoonist to produce an editorial cartoon that is devoid of any editorial content, which really defeats the purpose.

Based on what you've said and what I've been told by those working in the field, the motivation behind the refusal to help appears to be nothing more than spiteful pettiness based on a bizarre "turf war" over who controls editorial content.

Do you think that's an accurate assessment, at least as it applies to the situation in the US, or do you believe other issues are involved?

SÖYLE BABAN ERMENİMİ HA! KÖKÜNÜZ NEREDE?
AMA BEN...
ALAKASIZ TERÖRİSTLER! HEPİNİZ AYNISINIZ...
ŞAP!
EY VAH OĞUL YAK DAHA NE İSTİYORSUNUZ ULAN... TÜRKİYENİN BAŞINA BELA OLUYORSUNUZ
FAKAT... KARIŞTIRDIĞINIZ BEN...
ŞAP!
PUTUMA GÖRE TİNE ADI SULTAN NEZARETE DÜŞMÜŞ KEKO SİZMİŞ!
BU SÜREÇTE OLAYI BÖYLE DEĞERLENDİRMEN HATA OLUR SİYASİ ABE... ZATEN HEP SİZ YAPTINIZ...

Art by Dogan Guzel: the world's only editorial cartoonist currently residing in jail!

RR: Not being a cartoonist and not being a participant in the struggle between cartoonists and editors, I can't say much. What I do know is that a majority of cartoonists I meet in the developing world report that editors see cartoonists as extensions of their own personal editorial vision. In most cases they simply tell the cartoonist what to draw or at least what the message must be. [The cartoonists] see this as a loss to journalism and of course a loss to society's ability to process the vast amount of new political or social information that they are continually bombarded with.

The cartoonists feel it is the editors who are responsible for editorial cartoonists working far below their potential as social critics. To be fair to the editors ,however, in the developing world criticism of politicians can be dangerous or at least stressful, much more so than in the West. Brave cartoonists can easily be seen as loose cannons, and maybe the goons in that country would attack the editor before the cartoonist. The cartoonist almost always uses a *nom de plume*, and can beat it out the back door when the goons arrive. The editor has to stand up and take it on the chin.

Your analysis that this may all spring from petty turf considerations in the editorial office is probably as accurate as anyone can get about the situation.

Above and below: the work of Irfan Hussein, who died because of his beliefs.

JS: *Let's move on to how cartoonists find themselves in trouble. Have you noticed any common denominators in the cases the CRN has handled? By that, I mean is there a particular type of cartoon that seems to guarantee a hostile reaction?*

RR: There are some themes but no single common denominator, except of course that a particular cartoon set someone off, big time.

In Africa and Asia, you don't attack the "Big Man." In Islamic countries you don't attack the Mullahs or "insult" Islam. In very shaky or particularly repressive regimes the level of tolerance for criticism will be naturally very low. No one knows this better than the local journalists, including the cartoonists. Every theater has its own set of "the rules of the road" and every journalist learns them very quickly or suffers the consequences. Also, the "rules of the road" change as the theater changes. Look at Robert Mugabe's transition from enlightened despot to apparently insane dictator in Zimbabwe. The "rules of the road" for local journalists have changed so fast that nobody can keep up with them.

Moving from secular politics to religion, I have heard a fundamentalist Christian say, "If you have freedom of religion then you have freedom of speech." The fellow was really serious. One of the human rights organizations we have worked with in Iran asked us to publicly condemn a particular cartoonist's work because it had been declared an "insult" to Islam. Their position was that all freedom comes from God, not man - that Islam would protect your free speech rights in all situations except where insulting the Prophet or Islam was concerned. At that point, the individual moves outside of any system of protection. My experience is that a cartoonist breaching any fundamentalist religion's perception that religious law should govern all secular life will get into trouble.

When a cartoonist is attacked, his work has moved him outside of the protections that should be in place, however powerful or flimsy they may be in that environment. In a theocracy, the "state" offers no protections against insulting the religion. Where God is a jealous God, his minions have no truck with criticism of the deity, the deity's close relatives or in many cases the deity's representatives, the clergy.

Another trend: sometimes a cartoon is benign under normal circumstances, but may be volatile during certain moments of political crisis. Essam Hanafy's cartoon about the Minister of Agriculture in Egypt would have been passed over except that the issue he covered was a ragingly hot one at that time. Of course, that's why he drew it, isn't it? The cartoonist's job is not to play it safe but to tell the truth as he or she sees it.

One thing that does occur to me is that most attacks on cartoonists don't come as surprises. Most cartoonists are warned, threatened, harassed and maybe fired before they are physically attacked. Jiffry Yoonoos in Sri Lanka was warned a few times that he'd better leave the President alone. He didn't, and the "last straw" cartoon precipitated a stabbing and beating. "Popoli" in Cameroon was warned a few times before he was eventually threatened with death. It's when a cartoonist won't back off that bad things happen.

Of course, I also see that repressive regimes learn how covert actions against journalists always reap more criticism from the international community that they might gain for them domestically. They learn that they have enough in the way of insult or libel laws on the books to effect the same response: instead of beating them up at night in a dark alley, why not tie them up in court? Much cleaner. All nice and legal. It is much harder for the international free speech community to protest a legal action than a terrorist act.

More and more we see libel and insult laws being used very cleverly by governments that want to silence a cartoonist. In Egypt they can drag it out forever. Essam Hanafy spent many months in jail, to be released in a general amnesty the government arranges every year for journalists. However, the heavy fine he was given was kept intact, and the warning "no more critical cartoons" was the condition of his release. The fine was eventually lifted after he had suffered terrible economic hardships, but the amnesty is still conditional. He finds it nearly impossible to get work as a cartoon journalist. He is doing illustrations now. Our client in Iran finds himself in the same cauldron. Every time there is a political crisis in Tehran they "round up the usual suspects" and he is once again harassed by the authorities even to the point of temporary detention: they like to keep the journalist troublemakers off the streets so they can't express their opinions during these frequent crises.

Our clients in Panama, Julio Briceno and Victor Ramos, both have charges against them that seem to be dragging on forever. This costs them and their publishers, and it can have a very

effective chilling effect on them producing more critical cartoons. That's the whole point: it's far more effective to tie them up in court than to cut them down in an alley.

In some cases though, there is no warning. Muniru Turay in Sierra Leone was dragged out of his house and murdered in front of his family and neighbors. He had drawn a cartoon critical of the head of the Revolutionary United Front, Foday Sankoh, and when they invaded Freetown in 1999, Turay's name was on a hit list. I believe seven journalists were murdered during that period, with no warning. Irfan Hussein in India got a vague warning at a lawn party some weeks before he was killed, in what police decided was "a car-jacking gone wrong." But in most cases, an attack against a cartoonist is the result of a series of confrontations between the cartoonist and the entities who want them to stop.

Every theater is different, every case is different, but once a cartoonist strays from the known "rules of the road" for critical journalism, there will be trouble.

JS: *Since you've mentioned the religious element that is sometimes at work in oppressing cartoonists, I think this would be a good place to discuss what changes you've seen, if any, since the September 11 attacks.*

Has there been any hardening of treatment towards cartoonists in the Muslim world as a result of that international situation, or is it business as usual?

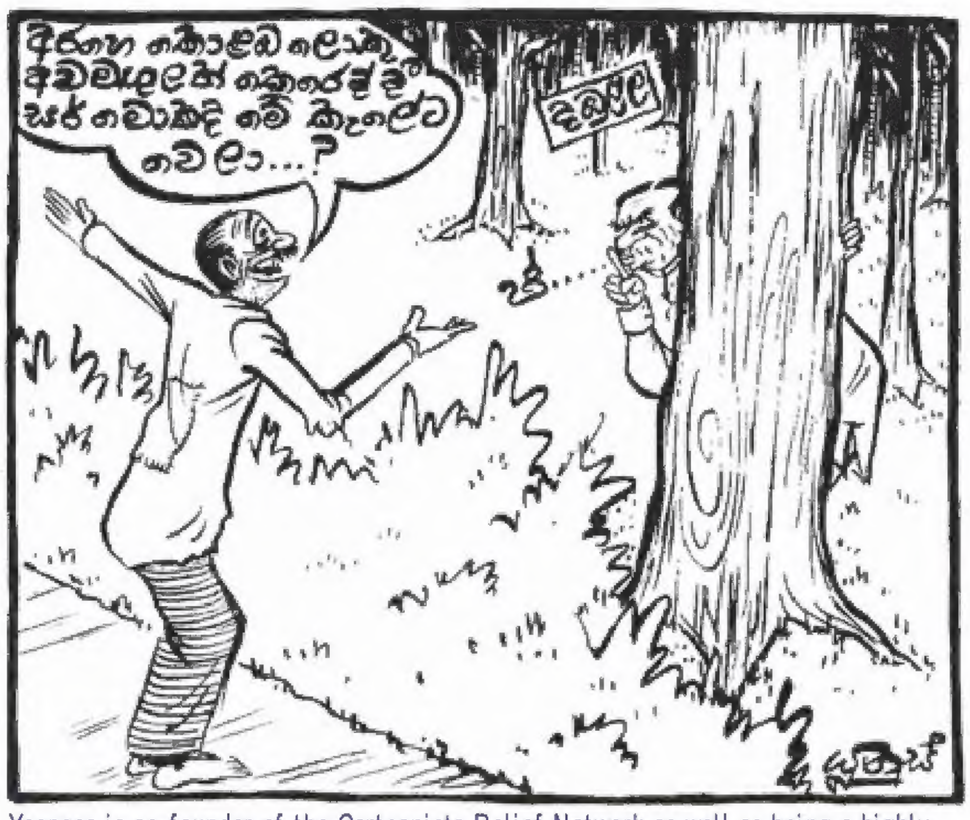
RR: One of our clients asked us to make sure to post his anti-American cartoons more prominently than the one he got into trouble for, one that was a parody of an Islamic Cleric. The real complaints about curtailment of freedom of expression liberties have come from American cartoonists. They are reporting that in the rush towards knee jerk patriotism, simplistic solutions, formulaic responses and politically correct bowel movements, anything other than a patriotic cartoon won't fly, with both editors and the public at large.

The very best cartoon I saw about September 11 was in the *International Herald Tribune* a day or so after the event. The planet Earth was floating in space, and we saw a threatening, heavily armed US soldier in a gas mask coming up over the far horizon. The Twin Towers were burning in the back ground behind him. He was demanding, "WHERE WERE YOU ON THE MORNING OF SEPTEMBER 11TH?"

In the foreground, on the Middle Eastern part of the globe was a small, diminutive character in a Palestinian-style head scarf. "We were starving," was his answer.

Now, you know that a US paper would *never, could* never have run this cartoon. Their windows would have been stoned by those listed above.

I really don't know how this has affected cartoonists in the Middle East.



Yoonoos is co-founder of the Cartoonists Relief Network as well as being a highly regarded cartoonist in his native Sri Lanka. However, he is also an enemy of the political party in office.

BACK IN THE USA

JS: *This calls to mind the recent controversy surrounding Ted Rall's now infamous "Terror Widows" cartoon[satirising the almost "media star" status attained by numerous widows of 9-11 victims], for which he caught an enormous amount of flak from various media pundits. From what I've been told, [WorldNetDaily columnist and former Reagan administration official] Alan Keyes was particularly hostile. Did you see this cartoon or hear about the controversy over it?*

RR: I didn't see the cartoon but I did hear of the controversy. Frankly, the questions about American cartoonists and what is happening here are not my forte.

What does come to mind about our collective unwillingness to critically review our own cultural and economic behavior is a quote from my favorite revolutionary, Leon Trotsky: "You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you.".

9/11 was a spectacular example of war's interest in us, and our lack of interest in it.

Fortunately, Ted Rall has as much right to draft his "Terror Widows" cartoon as Alan Keyes has to be critical of it. What a great example of free speech in action on the part of both parties. The controversy actually got many more people to view the cartoon. Despite any discomfort Rall felt, it's probably a symptom of his doing his job right. I wish American cartoonists would feel that discomfort more often. Obviously, if everybody is playing the game honestly, the overt criticism doesn't descend into covert threats. That's when we discover which the Constitution protects more enthusiastically: protests against free expression or the First Amendment.

JS: *I think for the sake of simplicity one could say that the harassment encountered by cartoonists in the industrialized world is primarily caused by individuals, which, if it gets out of hand, makes it a law enforcement issue. When the law is used to harass, that's when it becomes a human rights issue and groups such as the CRN become involved. Have I got that right?*

RR: Either way it's a human rights abuse. When anyone or any entity [in the USA] threatens to deprive you of your constitutional First Amendment right to express yourself freely, to the point of police intervention, it is illegal. [The police] wouldn't be involved unless there was something illegal going on. Taking a broader sweep, the President of the US and his political party are elected by the people to be the administration that has a brief to implement the Constitution for that four year period. The Presidential oath centers on, "to protect and defend the Constitution." Law enforcement officials are there to enforce the laws that the Supreme Court says are valid within the parameters of the Constitution. When criticism of a cartoonist goes into areas where the cartoonist's ability to freely express his or her opinions is compromised, we have a free speech abuse.

Cartoonists Rights Network gets involved in any such situation: whether triggered by an individual threatening to do harm to a cartoonist, or a rebel or terrorist group threatening the life of a cartoonist, or a government using "insult laws" to silence or intimidate a cartoonist. All are abridgments of a cartoonist's free speech rights under the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 19. That is the Granddaddy of all human rights covenants on planet Earth.

JS: *Returning to the international situation, you mentioned that the CRN has a large number of affiliates in Eastern Europe. I'm curious about that region, since we never seem to hear anything about it unless there's been another flare-up of ethnic cleansing around Serbia. Is harassment particularly acute there?*

RR: No. Harassment isn't acute in the region, but the atmosphere of fear, self-censorship and intimidation from authoritarian leaders is still there, a remnant of the Soviet and Socialist days when free expression was not welcome and criticism of the State was selectively illegal. The feeling I get is that the cartoonists are climbing out of a deep and dark political, social and economic "well" and there are no guidebooks for how to behave and how to survive under the free market system. Perhaps the remarkable response we are getting in Eastern Europe is because cartoonists instinctively understand that they need to re-create the support networks that did not survive the transition. Perhaps in the rest of the world, old institutions are still providing some semblance of community for cartoonists and there is no sense of a need to reform.

Ironically, my experience also tells me that in most cases, existing journalism professional societies ignore the cartoonists I've met in Africa: they are as isolated as any in Eastern Europe.

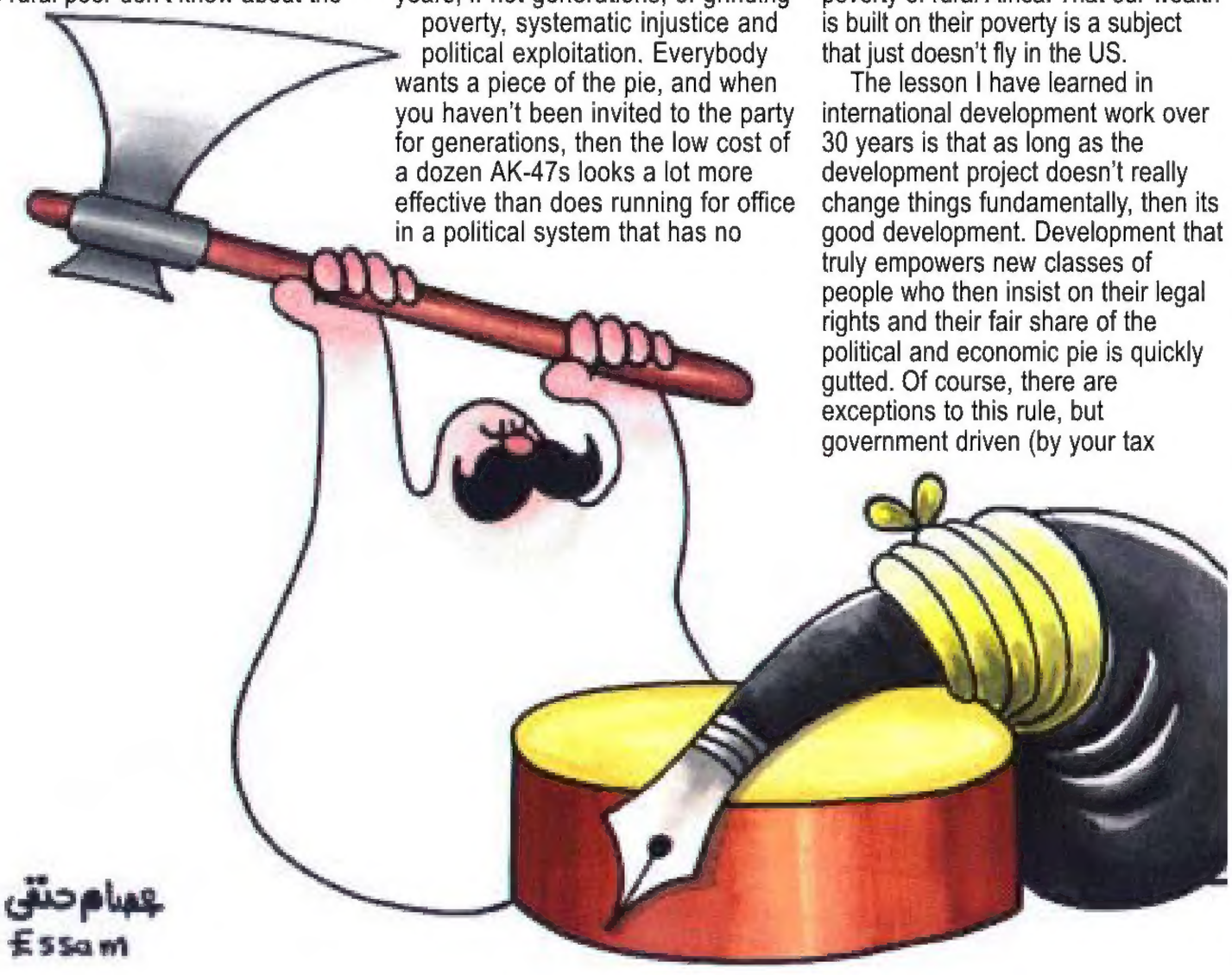
JS: *From what you said before about the murder of Muniru Turay, I'm gathering that Africa presents a daunting task in terms of human rights and free expression. In many African nations, it seems that the rule of law is an of-the-moment concept, and individual rights largely ignored. Are you seeing any progress there towards organizing the cartoonists and other journalists to deal with these problems?*

RR: It depends on which rule of law you are referring to. Like my son says about playing soccer (he's a professional player currently working in Norway), "The rules are whatever the referee decides to enforce at any given moment."

The laws associated with modern states as they were inherited from the colonial master may or may not serve the needs of some or most of the people at any given moment. These laws reach down into rural and often uneducated society, and either do or do not meet the needs for justice of that particular segment of society at any given moment.

In many emerging nations, the modern justice system more often than not serves the needs of the educated, politically well-connected sector of society. The vast majority of the rural poor don't know about the justice system, and may not care for it. The vast differences in the culture of the educated and the uneducated are a tremendous barrier to justice too. The wealthy and educated look down their noses at their poorer country cousins and may often assume they don't really need all that much of justice, especially when wealth and power is built on the cheap labor and low cost resources supplied by the rural poor.

This is all to say that the violent of-the-moment law which our news services show us with such enthusiasm is usually preceded by years, if not generations, of grinding poverty, systematic injustice and political exploitation. Everybody wants a piece of the pie, and when you haven't been invited to the party for generations, then the low cost of a dozen AK-47s looks a lot more effective than does running for office in a political system that has no place for you.



African journalists learn very quickly that in the West, there are certain taboos. If you want to access the West's resources, training, fellowships, professional societies, consulting fees and awards, then shining the flashlight of editorial cartooning or investigative cartooning on the inequities of wealth and poverty quickly becomes a ticket to oblivion. This is especially true about stories or cartoons that connect the dots between our cheap foods and cheap resources, our political and military hegemony, and the systemic grinding poverty of rural Africa. That our wealth is built on their poverty is a subject that just doesn't fly in the US.

The lesson I have learned in international development work over 30 years is that as long as the development project doesn't really change things fundamentally, then its good development. Development that truly empowers new classes of people who then insist on their legal rights and their fair share of the political and economic pie is quickly gutted. Of course, there are exceptions to this rule, but government driven (by your tax money) development practices often follow this pattern. I suspect that the relationship between African and Western journalism follows this pattern too.

I don't know that much about programs for print and electronic journalists. I do see evidence that almost all of the money in journalism for development and institution building goes to investigative and electronic reporting. I see nothing going to develop the professional environment for cartoonists, anywhere. I mean, literally nothing.

The largest single file in my office is named "Cartoonists Not Welcome". These are award programs, training programs, academic courses, study trips and sabbaticals, open to journalists but not to cartoonists. Frankly, I think it's a cultural thing: cartoonists come in late, sit in a corner of the editorial room, scratch their heads while they read about a dozen papers, they seem to go to sleep for a few moments, then draw for about an hour, drop a cartoon on the editor's desk, then it's time for lunch, from which they never come back.

Publishers and editors don't seem to be capable of connecting the dots either. The cartoonists in Africa and most of the rest of the world often enjoy "rock star" popularity, especially when they are allowed to draw their own ideas. They are avidly read, and probably get more popular attention from the public than any of the editorial writers. Development experts are equally clueless. An editorial cartoonist has instant and broad public recognition and credibility. A Ministry of Health comic book about HIV/AIDs or environmental awareness drawn by a Ministry illustrator will carry none of the credibility and impact it might have

had if it were drawn by a popular and recognized editorial cartoonist.

But, as I've implied, development administrators usually don't have the courage for really impactful work. The development administrator will say, "Gee, this cartoonist might carry some political baggage, maybe the head of state doesn't like him. We better go with the Ministry illustrator. No controversy". Also, though, no credibility and no gain. They don't connect the dots: a cartoonist's "rock star" popularity, and powerful images, and the need to communicate social development messages quickly and powerfully.

CARTOONS AS FINE ART?

JS: *I'd like to know if there is a distinction in Africa between editorial cartooning and fine arts. For example, I remember seeing the work of a Zairean painter, Cheri Samba, whose work would be considered cartooning in the US, but appears to be thought of as fine art everywhere else. His paintings use a lot of text and the samples I've seen contained some very harsh social commentary about African and Western sexual habits, as well as about panhandling in Kinshasa and religious hypocrisy.*

Based on your experience, do you think that African cartoonists draw a distinction between art and journalism, or would they reject such a separation?

RR: I do know that many African cartoonists double as fine artists. Cartoonists all over the world do this, and their styles in cartooning and fine arts can be vastly different. I know of some very excellent portrait painters who are also cartoonists, and they have no trouble shifting from one style to the other. Maybe the cartoonists don't see a divide between fine arts and cartoon journalism, but everybody else in the world does. If you look deeply into what Eastern European cartoonists are doing, you see seriously cerebral thinkers at work. Western cartoonists working in the editorial cartooning style are also trying to pull the viewer into a deeper understanding of a politician's mind, or a political situation. Isn't that the task of any fine or cartoon artist? To get us to think, feel or react? The result, always, is communication.

Many cartoonists who want to make a full time living at being artists must diversify their abilities: some are illustrators, some are art directors, some are art teachers, some work in two or three different styles to make sure they take advantage of every corner of the market that they can access.

One of our clients in Nigeria recently told me that he is cutting back on his cartooning work to pursue fine art painting. He had recently met an American gallery owner who agreed to represent him. His market is changing, and he feels he has to change too to keep his cash flow in positive areas.

I don't know many societies in Africa where typical upper income households spend disposable income on the arts, fine or cartoon. Worse, editorial cartoons are not considered a legitimate form of investment, or of appreciative art, by the buying public. It's the same here in the US. There's a very, *very* small market for editorial cartoons. Usually it's the subject of the cartoon who wants to buy it from the cartoonist. There are only a few regular cartoon auctions every year in the US. When Sotheby's or Christie's dedicate an auction exclusively to editorial cartoons then there may be a turnaround in the public's perception of the extrinsic value of cartoons. I often advise the Cartoonists Rights Network affiliate organizations in Africa to develop marketing strategies for tapping the expatriate communities: development workers, UN workers, diplomats, corporation executives, tourists. I can't imagine that knowledgeable diplomats wouldn't want to go home at the end of their tours without a few editorial cartoon originals about the issues or personalities they might have been personally involved with.

Fine arts galleries that I have visited in Africa share the common feeling that editorial cartoon art is unmarketable, so they usually don't represent cartoonists. Another case for cartoonists having their own strong and vibrant professional organizations.

JS: *Well, I guess I was off base on that last question. Looking at Samba's paintings had given me the notion that African painters were utilizing their canvases for the kind of commentary usually reserved for cartoonists. However, from what you said about galleries in Africa, I guess that the division between cartooning and fine art is just as rigid there as anywhere else, and Samba is an anomaly.*

I do find the notion that editorial cartooning is unmarketable to be curious, especially considering that there is a growing market for original comicbook and comic strip art. It just seems inconceivable that no one anywhere would be interested in owning the original artwork for a cartoon that they really enjoyed, and I have to wonder how aggressively anyone has ever attempted to market such work.

Which leads to my next, perhaps rather cynical question: do you think that if there was a significant market for purchasing original editorial cartoon art, cartoonists in that field might enjoy more respect and perhaps greater protection of their rights?

Cartoon of Askin Ayranciogul, a Turkish cartoonist. He has been arrested for "insulting the dignity of the military" a criminal offence in Turkey. He is waiting for the court to set firm dates for his trial.

RR: In our experience the thugs that attack cartoonists do so (in most instances) because they believe they can act with impunity. It's the same with editors or reporters who are targeted. It is also why so many attacks are done in "night and fog", so responsibility can be denied by the perps. In recently enthroned despotic regimes, the Goon Squad methods eventually give way to legal actions as

the inexperienced governments learn how to act like members of the world's community of nations. That's when they start using the law to deprive their citizens of their rights. Isn't that just cunning, how civilization works?

If wishes were horses then beggars could ride. If editorial cartoonists had stronger markets, if their work was recognized as extrinsically and intrinsically valuable, then yes, of course they would have a stronger platform from which to defend themselves.

One explanation that I've heard as to why editorial cartooning has such a poor market is that, unlike fine art that is perceived as "ageless," editorial cartoon art is about a topic that is off the front pages tomorrow.

Popularizing editorial cartoons as serious collectibles would take a generation of broad based marketing. A good start would be for the major auction houses to dedicate an annual auction exclusively to editorial cartoons. The major private collectors should also agree to release a minimum number of important cartoons onto the market every year, even if they traded them between themselves. Cartooning web sites should all have auctions, publishing results as cartoons are sold [even] if many prices were embarrassingly low to start with.

Resisting developments like these are the editorial cartoonists themselves. It is a marginal business at best, and highly competitive. There are dozens of wannabe cartoonists, some quite excellent, for every one who makes even a part time job out of it. Developing a market, boosting up an industry, takes resources and dedicated individuals. Here in the US, their national professional association isn't capable of really undertaking a sustained and probably expensive national effort to stem the tide of car-

The first of two illustrations by Sayit Saatci, a Turkish-Kurd artist.

toonists who are ebbing from the nation's newspapers and journals. How do you stimulate an industry that many are saying is dying already? Where is the investor to support what many see as a losing concern?

I got an email yesterday from a well-known and nationally recognized Pulitzer Prize nominee cartoonist working here in the US. The list of publications using his cartoons reads like a who's who of popular journalism. He told me that he was seriously considering giving up cartooning altogether. He just can't make a go of it any longer. He is a major name too.

I'm often approached by the in-house journals of some of the larger international development organizations, wanting to use our cartoonists in their public relations campaigns. Inevitably, they want a cartoon for free, of course. I usually send the request on to my network of clients, with a cover email expressing my frustration: "don't do it", I usually say. Why is it OK for their staff to collect their monthly pay check, but CRN's cartoonist clients are supposed to work for free? And after nearly giving their lives for issues of free speech.

Jerry Robinson and his Cartoonists and Writers Syndicate in New York City are trying their best to make cartooning pay for many Second and Third World cartoonists. I applaud his efforts and I know it's very hard for them to make ends meet sometimes.

What I do know from my thirty years in international development work is this: if cartoonists can become more interconnected; if they have the technical capacity to communicate across generations, languages and cultures; if they discover how to expand their horizons; then they will regenerate their craft. They say in this business that the best editorial cartoons are always local. Cartoonists can often be myopic in their worldviews. Cartooning has not been as fast as other parts of journalism to embrace the electronic revolution. The major journalism donors and training institutions are virtually blind-sided to them. All the development and technology money is going into investigative and radio and TV reporting and management. It's curious to me, since after a reporter digs up the dirt and exposes it on the front page, doesn't a cartoonist somewhere have to help us form our opinions about it?

The editorial writer expresses the paper's point of view, but the editorial cartoonist presents us with a Rorschach test of political consciousness. The writer gives us an opinion. The cartoonist demands we think about it.

REAL NEWS VS. INFOTAINMENT

JS: *I think most people would be surprised to learn that editorial cartooning is either held in such low esteem or feared so intensely, particularly when one considers the state of the craft at the turn of the last century. Publishers like Hearst paid handsomely for editorial cartoons and comic strips.*

Besides the "editorial room" hostility towards cartoonists that we've already discussed, what other factors do you think have played a role in the decline we're seeing?

RR: H.L. Mencken once said, "Give me one good cartoonist and I can fire half my editorial staff." So much for where the "editorial room" hostility comes from.

One contributing factor in the decline might be the last two decades' phenomenal transition for the news industry from hard news programming to news as entertainment. I divide the US into two classes: those who are the news and those who want to be the news. The new reality programs might as well be called "The average Joe and Jane get their 15 minutes of fame: maybe you can too". Andy Warhol was so right when he predicted, "Someday, everybody will have 15 minutes of fame".

The lines that should have been protecting hard news from encroachment by entertainment and corporate interests have become badly blurred. Like Bill Murray said in *Ghostbusters* when his character was trying to rebuff the advances of Sigourney Weaver's sultry and demonic character, "I have a hard and fast rule that I never kiss on the first date". As his resolve dissolves he reconsiders, saying, "Well, it was more like a guideline than a rule". The seductive attractions of demonic entertainment have turned the integrity of hard news into damaged goods. And we like it, don't we?

Nobody knows this better than the major news networks and their reporters. CNN's Christiane Amanpour is already being edged aside by younger and prettier young things in photographer vests (apologies, Christiane, I think you're still A-1). [Fox News'] Gretta van Susteren has had work done. Great work too, sister. When I was growing up with TV, the early talk show hosts like Jack Parr had hard and fast rules that no guest could directly plug their new Broadway show or film or book. Now, you don't get on unless you are promoting a project somewhere in the entertainment industry. Publicity

The second of Seyit Saatci's illustrations. He is under arrest for promoting an illegal organisation in Turkey (but not illegal to the Kurds).

agents are running television's news and talk shows, not producers. I used to love CBS' *Sunday Morning with Charles Kuralt*. He really loved his fellow Americans. He loved being an American - his subjects were his heroes. They were those unsung, free spirit, cantankerous, unorthodox, down in the dumps poor, trailer park renaissance geniuses: pure creators. Charles always had an outstanding and obvious admiration for them. That they had no other self-promoting agenda was an attraction, not a disqualification. Now that he's gone and others have taken over, you can't see a story on that program that doesn't have the stink of a publicity or marketing agent about it.

I really don't know why the automotive industry, or the insurance industry, or any other non-entertainment industry doesn't rise up in revolution about how the entertainment industry affords itself massive and ubiquitous free advertising any time it wants. All the other industries have to pay for advertising time. The evening talk shows, the afternoon shows, morning magazine shows (there are no more national morning news shows) blatantly promote commercial ventures in the entertainment field that are probably interconnected and redolent of insider interests.

MGM gets tens of free hours of national exposure for a new movie, but General Motors has to pay through the nose to sell a truck. How come entertainment gets it for free and everybody else has to pay?

While editorial cartoonists also provide a brief, entertaining moment, they are the victims of the well documented "dumbing down" of American political consciousness that has been a by-product of the public's insatiable appetite for entertainment. We want our media to fulfil our fantasies, not confront our consciences with unpleasant contradictions and realities. Television, more and more, gives us that first option. I think we learn that we can then demand that same compromise from our newspapers. With zillions of channels to choose from (just like the editor selecting a more simplistic, uncontroversial cartoon from the dozen or so the syndicate sends over every morning), Mr. and Mrs. Couch Potato and the little spuds can change channels and find a dozen less stressful programs to watch.

After the attacks of 9/11 the airwaves were filled with reporters asking really difficult questions about why they hate us, what is it about our life style that precipitates such suicidal hate, how deep is that "terrorist" well and how can we establish more meaningful lines of communications? Can we win a war against an enemy that we keep creating? Well, that introspection didn't last long before the patriotic zealots made such questions un-American. I'd love to see the behind the scenes connections between those zealots and a corporate America that doesn't want those questions to be answered.

I'm drifting.

As Joel Pett, the 2000 Pulitzer Prize winner, once observed, on any given day he could go into the editorial room and take over the job of any reporter there and still do a credible job of writing their story that night. Sports, city, national, editorial commentary, the garden page: he (and most other cartoonists) could handle any assignment with credit. But find one other person at the paper who can do what he does, and you come up totally, absolutely blank. Not in fifteen years could anyone do what he does.

I think Americans have decided that our collective appetite for unpleasantness is not very high. Luckily for us, the entertainment business that is fast encroaching on news programs holds out a promise: you can have your news and enjoy it too. Editorial cartoonists have discovered that they too are not immune, and have had to dumb down their cartoons in order to be acceptable to the changing moods and reduced information needs of the public.

While the decline in cartooning is very much economic, it's important to America's tradition of freedom of expression that the decline seems to be in intellectual integrity too. Free expression: use it or lose it. Letting it go seems to be so easy under entertainment's present regime, but when we really urgently need it, when our very survival depends on our ability to argue passionately with each other without pulling guns, it will be very difficult to retrieve.

ORGANISE AND REGROUP

JS: *Actually, this has reminded me of an endless debate that went on when I was studying painting in college, which I think may have a bearing on the status of editorial cartoonists.*

While I was in school, the art students were divided into more or less two camps, the fine artists (the "Snobs") and the commercial artists (the "Slobs"), and each group was contemptuous of the other. The "Snobs" considered themselves to be the intellectual superiors of the "Slobs", because their work was personal and expressed their own feelings or viewpoints. The "Slobs" rejected this as either self-indulgent or a justification for what they saw as the "Snobs" lack of technical ability. The "Snobs" viewed the "Slobs" as whores. The "Slobs" viewed the "Snobs" as lazy losers.

I think there was some truth to both positions and I doubt that the battle between artistic integrity and commercial success will ever be settled. However, it seems to me that editorial cartoonists are in a grey area. Their work is personal and commercial at the same time, yet they aren't held in very high esteem by either the intellectual or business communities and neither wants to lay any claim to them.

I remember when the "Sensation" exhibition was held in New York a few years ago and everyone was up in arms over Chris Ofili's so-called "Dung Madonna." When the Museum was threatened with a withholding of funding by the city, the arts community and the media rose in its defense. These same groups could hardly be said to have risen up to defend Ted Rall over his "Terror Widows" cartoon. His only defenders seemed to be other editorial cartoonists.

There is a terrible double standard that appears to be in operation here. It seems that editorial cartooning isn't considered a legitimate artform in its own right, in spite of the reactions that are aroused by it and the danger its practitioners sometimes find themselves in. I have to wonder if this isn't at least a part of the reason why both the journalist organizations and the arts community continue to devalue their work and turn a blind eye to their problems.

Or I could just be completely full of it? Have you ever heard anything similar to this?

RR: Maybe it's because editorial cartoonists and the style of cartooning used in America are like the really cute little porcupine. You never know when your friendly hand will come away with a quill in it.

All the groups you mention, arts types, journalists, welcome people into their ranks who are just like them. Editorial cartoonists are really a breed apart, and maybe that's why they are so isolated.

We just finished a four day workshop in Romania of cartoonists from the UK, America, France, Cameroon, Bulgaria, Romania, Yugoslavia and the Ukraine. The head of the Federation of Cartoonists Organizations (FECO) was there and the head of African Journalists in Exile, operating from France, was also there. The most prominent cartoonists from Eastern Europe were also present.

Art by Pavel Botezatu

As we conducted a "Situational Analysis" about cartoonists and their problems, a few themes clearly emerged. Cartoonists operate in isolation. Even in an editorial room, they are the only cartoonist, not often a part of the regular editorial room decision-making process. Then, they said they don't have good access to the information they require to produce the most effective cartoons. Finally, they said they are not well organized, either personally or professionally. One observation was that they are, personally, among the most disorganized people in the world. All these conditions may explain why cartoonists are not as well integrated into journalism's culture as they would like.

Another story came from one of the most prominent and informed cartoonists present. He said that his paper had done a readership survey to find out what kinds of things the paper was doing that pleased the readers the most. The senior editor sat on the report, markedly leaving the cartoonist out of the distribution list. He suspects that there was strong feedback [demonstrating] that the cartoon was in many readers' opinion one of the most important features of the paper. He thinks the reason the editors didn't want him reading the report was that he would probably ask for a raise, knowing just how powerful and important he was.

Cartoonists everywhere are clearly victims of the editorial room's suspected prejudices about the low value of cartoonists.

One thing we are discussing at Cartoonists Rights Network is that in any of our regional workshops, editors and publishers should be targeted as participants, using the gatherings of cartoonists to drive home the level of frustration and isolation many cartoonists feel.

JS: *I can agree with the assertion that cartoonists are disorganized, based on my own experiences with them on an individual and group basis. The bizarre thing that I've noticed is that even when they are in a group, they tend to be highly resistant to any collective action.*

For example, a little over a year ago there was a suggestion that the cartoonist group that I belonged to try to begin establishing an across the board arts organization similar to the Creative Forum in Nashville, TN. Now, every member who had participated in the CF was deeply impressed with it and longed for a similar event here, and yet, in spite of this, the ones who supported the idea were unable to interest the rest of the group and the idea was dropped.

Art by Stavro Jabra

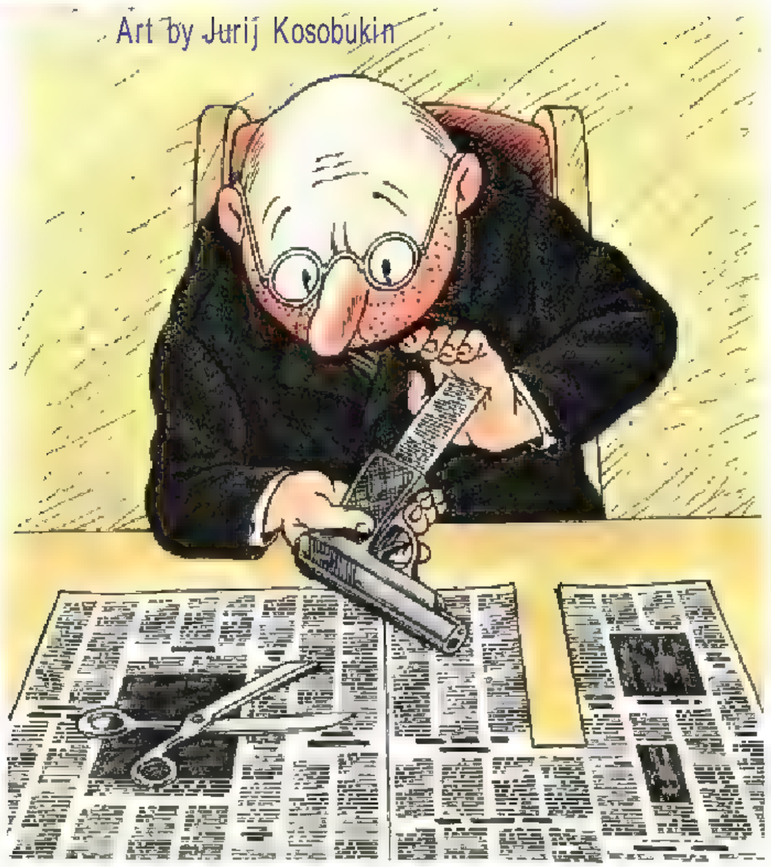
I suspect that this isn't an isolated incident, and I have to wonder if organizing cartoonists is possible. So the question that presents itself is, how can this ingrained disorganization be overcome? Do you have any practical ideas on how to do this?

RR: A good conundrum within a contradiction wrapped in an inconsistency.

The bottom line is the bottom line when it comes to cartoonists organizing themselves. I feel that any organization of cartoonists will be doomed unless the organization somehow addresses the individual cartoonists' financial and maybe personal self-interests. This is not brain surgery or rocket science. It's not even Mrs. Green's 8th grade Social Studies.

In many instances where organizations are run by the members of the group (as opposed to a professional paid leader engaged for his or her leadership and organizational skills), some few members often gain control of the best "insider" resources. Over time, many non-governmental organizations (often inadvertently) tend to operate for the benefit of the leaders. After all, it's hard to generate genuine opportunities for a lot of members. Members begin to grumble... "Why invest my time and effort if Joe Schmoe, the organization's President, is going to get the lion's share of the benefits?"

Another consideration: I was warned yesterday in a conversation with a Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist, that perhaps American cartoonists don't respond to efforts to get us more integrated with our European and Eastern European colleagues because our cartooning just isn't up to their standards. Side by side, American cartoonists might be afraid that their work just can't hold a technical candle to [that of] many vastly more sophisticated European and Eastern European cartoonists. Too close association with a wider pool of cartoonists might somehow reveal our insecurities



about our own work.

The contradiction is that 99% of these organizations will be voluntarily run by the members in order to save money, and there will always be the temptation, real or imagined, to think that the leaders will be receiving the best opportunities for themselves. The cartoonist putting his or her hand up above the others to provide leadership assumes a mantle of strength and success. "Why should my monthly dues and voluntary efforts be used to enhance the standing of a fellow cartoonist who may not really be a better cartoonist than I?"

In an economic atmosphere where every cartoonist is struggling with the others for the scraps that fall behind the big names, organizing might be seen as counterproductive. We also have the persistent complaint of the second and third tier of cartoonists - that the big names, when they arrive at "big namehood", immediately distance themselves from the common lower level cartoonist. It's a kind of voluntary caste system where the big names don't like to rub elbows with the Hoi Polloi. How very Hollywood. Of course there are the grand exceptions, where some very few of the big names really *do* recall where they came from, and stay loyal to old friends and work hard to mentor the young ones.

But unless an organization can defy the temptation to start working only for the few leaders, and keep kicking up new resources for the members, and run the occasional exhibit or charity event to showcase hidden talent, it won't last long.

To be successful, I think cartooning organizations must work hard at generating new sources of income, new publishing opportunities, new ego stroking events, new ways for the member to become more competitive and get more face time with the public. You also have to be able to find really selfless leadership willing to give time and energy for the genuine benefit of others.

Maybe if one of the members had made some research into how Creative Forum in Nashville was actually contributing to the increased income of its members, the cartoonists might have been more interested.

***JS**: Given the notorious insecurities of creative people and the difficulty in getting and keeping them organized, how do you approach cartoonists to lend their support to the CRN? Is there a "hook" that resonates with them?*

RR: We have had mad success in Eastern Europe. Not so much in Africa, and very limited interest from Latin America. Some interest from Asia.

In Eastern Europe we are tapping into a deeply felt need cartoonists have to find new meaning in their lives and work. Under the socialist and communist regimes, their sense of righteous indignation and the satirical scripts that the regimes and politicians generated were food for the cartoonist's pen as well as soul. With the fall of the wall and the old targets, cartoonists (and other humorists) were cast adrift with no moving targets.

Cartoonists in Eastern Europe are hungry for the adrenaline rush, for the righteous stand. We offer them just this. We promise cartoonists that they will once again be players in the human rights game, involving themselves in (sometimes) life and death issues with other cartoonist colleagues who are much deeper in the smelly, gooey stuff than they. All of them can identify with the cartoonist in Africa or Asia who has been locked up either in jail or in a court case. They have all felt very personally the long arm of censorship, in whatever delivery system it came in.

Right now they are more afraid of the insidious reach of the new journalism barons and the Mafiosi that follow in their trail. *They* are much more dangerous than the old political regimes ever were. They use economics, not politics, to stifle a press. They don't even break laws. How's a hard working free speech organization supposed to grab a hold of that?

***JS**: Let's go into that a bit. Who are these new barons and what economic tactics are they using? What's behind it all?*

RR: In the newly emerging states (while they were still under the previous communist administrations), there was always an underground economy with various brands of "fixers" running things. After all, nature abhors a vacuum, and socialist economies had run themselves down into endless bureaucracies that produced little to sustain their people. Under the new rules (which are really the lack of rules) of democracy there is a gross lack of any tradition of recognized checks and balances. Some of the same old fixers have shifted gears and found their old places in the new emerging economies. As chaos destroys the old it creates anew.

It turns out journalists have their own role in the new game. In these emerging economies, the major local media organizations are usually attached to one political party or another - attachments that are much stronger than what we are used to in the US. The party in power, because there are so few new checks and balances and because free speech is such a new phenomenon with no traditions, has a fairly free time of it closing down troublesome opponents trying to access public opinion through the media. As the newspapers, TV stations and radio are so politicized, its almost fair game for an opponent to attack them.

As a result, the media waxes and wanes according to who's in power. For example, the State can influence import licenses for ink or newspaper. A mayor can send in local municipal inspectors and close a paper or TV station down for late payment of some obscure tax, or for a real or imagined violation of the fire code. A struggling marginal press cannot stand too much of such harassment before it goes broke. With so few free expression checks and balances and no tradition of a free press among the people, most of these harassments succeed. After all, they are for the most part legal. Then, the power of the State can also lean on the business community to stop advertising with a certain daily paper or TV station. Having no perceived vested interest in free speech issues, advertisers cave in quickly under State influence. The State or a well

Art by Vladimir Kazanevsky

bankrolled private media owner can offer better advertising rates as incentives for switching from a free and independent paper to a State- or politically supported or controlled paper.

The rich and powerful have found that to control the media is to control the national agenda. If you want to control public debate, you must control the media.

Let's look at a specific example. In the *Washington Times* of November 14 2002, there was a story by David R. Sands about a Kazakhstani journalist, Sergei Duvanov. A long time critic of Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev, Duvanov was originally simply beaten in a "night and fog" attack by some still unidentified goons. Sensitive to the international free speech press, the President himself condemned the beating. Soon after, Duvanov was charged with "insulting the dignity and honor of the President." The international human rights and free expression community has learned how to bring powerful international attention to a political leader who uses these anachronistic laws to suppress the press. These charges were later dropped. However, the beating remains unsolved.

These old, familiar tactics not working, Duvanov was recently charged with raping an underage girl. This was just before he was to come to the US to receive an international prize for his work in human rights.

Ah, yes. Raping an underage girl. Paedophilia. How clever. The law in Kazakhstan protects the identity of a youthful victim (as most countries do) by making the trial secret. So no international agency can attend to confirm a free and fair trial. In addition, we all know what happens to anyone charged with paedophilia. Even those found not guilty, even when charges are dropped, their reputation is forever ruined. There will always be some little doubt in every friend or foe's mind - maybe he got off under a technicality... And Duvanov is supposed to come to the US to pick up an international award for human rights.

How insidious. But how clever. The State goes from brute violence to anachronistic laws, to inflicting damage to a reputation whether or not he is found guilty. The State is in a win/win situation and has blocked the free speech and human rights movement in its tracks. The State showed creativity, flexibility, initiative, and thinking outside of the envelope in achieving its will over this man. It takes the international free speech and human rights community sometimes *years* to develop new responses and create effective strategies for dealing with new and unpredictable attacks. The State invented this strategy in *weeks*.

Another example. In one Eastern European country, one of the most powerful "Mafia" dons is a major media owner. His presses print calendars, invitations, annual reports, quarterly reports, etc., for the major industries. Surprisingly, these printed products cost the industries up to 10 times the normal open market costs. The media mogul makes sure the extra income is shared with the political personalities that approve the licenses, and maintains the silent partnerships that assure the industries of good government relations. What better position to have such a person than in a major printing house? After all, everybody needs a printer. The publisher keeps his own commission, he passes on the kickbacks to those who protect him and the industries best. As the source of the corrupt money, he is insulated by those on the payroll and even by those who want to eventually get on the payroll.

Against all this is the power, majesty and passion of the lonely individual journalist, working for a clear conscience. In our cases, they are cartoonists who see these things and conspire rather to undo them.

Free speech is the great leveller, the bulldozer that makes the playing field as level as it can be. Sometimes, though, it seems more like a wheelbarrow.

If you would like to know more about the CRN and the ongoing work to secure the rights of editorial cartoonists, there are two websites you can visit. The first is the official CRN website at http://www.interplus.ro/smileclub/. The second is on Daryl Cagle's webpage at http://cagle.slate.msn.com/crn/

SPREAD THE WORD.

CASE STUDY: JIFFRY YOONOOS, SRI LANKA

A CO-founder of the Cartoonists Relief Network, Sri Lankan cartoonist Yoonoos was badly beaten by the palace "Goon Squad" after a series of cartoons featuring the "Big Man" himself, President Primadasa.

In this one, the soldier tells the President, who's on a field visit to the troops, that it's safe for him to visit, they have already cleared any mines. Of course we see the price the soldier paid for his mine clearing services and the look of utter indifference, almost humour one might say, on the face of Primadasa.

CASE STUDY: CORAX, SERBIA

DURING the Milosevic era Corax was under the microscope. In his own words: "People here [thought] that President Milosevic didn't make any trouble for me because in that way he could show to the West that the independent press exists here.

"There is a journalist here that claims that it happened during the visit of Richard Holbrooke. Mr. Milosevic showed him my cartoons in newspapers, asking him: 'have those newspapers been forbidden and is the cartoonist in prison?'

Corax had become the exception that proves the rule.

He said, "... and I had lots of problems especially because of the cartoons which referred to Milosevic, his wife, Karadzic and Mladic and some others. My exhibition, which had [been due] to take place in the center of Belgrade, was forbidden. I also was put on trial , but the prosecutor stopped the charges otherwise he [said it] would be very funny."

CASE STUDY: ESSAM HANAFY

IN the late 1990s the cartoonist for the Egyptian opposition newspaper *El-Shaabm*, Essam Hanafy, and three of his colleagues were arrested and charged with libelling the Deputy Prime Minister/Minister of Agriculture, a close associate of President Hosni Mubarak. The charge was the result of a cartoon that Hanafy had drawn for the paper, illustrating the failure of the Minister's policy. After a lopsided and unjust trial, he and his colleagues were found guilty. While his colleagues reported for jail, Hanafy, incredulous that a simple drawing could justify a person being imprisoned, hid out instead.

The police brought in Hanafy's brother, Salim, for questioning, harassed his father and wife, and even went to his children's school searching for him. In the meantime, the attorneys got an appeals court to agree that the first trial was unfair and biased. A new trial was promised if only Hanafy would turn himself in. He did, and was thrown in jail. When a date was set for the new trial, he was released. On March 13, 2000 the second trial started. From the first hour it was apparent that there was to be no fair trial.

Normally a court is supposed to hear all the evidence, make sure both prosecution and defense have an equal chance to present their cases, and then make a judgment according to agreed upon laws. However, when Hanafy reached court it was already surrounded by the police, anticipating a guilty verdict. The judges changed the venue of the hearings, giving no advance warning to the defense counsel who thus arrived late.

During Hanafy's incarceration, the CRN mounted a letter writing campaign to persuade the Egyptian Government to treat his case fairly. American cartoonists Joel Pett and Dani Eagle drew some cartoons especially for CRN that were sent to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Cairo. They are shown here.

This picture is self-explanatory – Hanafy in an Egyptian prison!

As a result of this pressure, the appeals court decided to forgo any further jail time, but saddled Hanafy with a ruinous fine that was almost the equivalent of a year's income. This has allowed the authorities to continue their harassment. On one occasion, the police arrived at his home and demanded partial payment of the fine, which he didn't have. The police then looted his home, taking his furniture. Since then, Hanafy has learned that his family is harassed less when he isn't home, so he spends much of his time living with friends.

Currently, Hanafy supports himself as an illustrator. He is not allowed to produce editorial cartoons.

CASE STUDY: IRFAN HUSSEIN

On March 13, 1998, Irfan Hussein, editorial cartoonist in New Delhi was killed under mysterious circumstances on his way home from work. His mutilated body was found on the side of a road in an area that sees one or two dumped bodies on a weekly basis. He had been stabbed 28 times, strangled and his throat had been slashed. His car, phone and personal jewelry were gone. After his kidnapping, but before his body had been found, the wife of another Delhi cartoonist received a phone call informing her that Irfan was dead, and that her husband (a cartoonist with the National Herald in Delhi) was next. The caller identified himself as from the Shiv Sena political movement.

The following December, Dr. Munira Hussein told CRN that she had just returned from a trip to New Delhi where she met with police officials. They discussed breaking events concerning the case of her husband Irfan. The police have always maintained that he died as a result of a car jacking gone wrong.

The police had captured a car jacking gang who claimed credit for the killing. They said that Irfan had insulted them during the car jacking so they killed him. Showing police where they had thrown away Irfan's hand bag, police found it where they said it would be. For the police, this seemed to be enough to close the case. However, Dr. Hussein pointed out to Cartoonists Rights Network that there were still significant inconsistencies that needed clarification before she could put the issues of how and why about her husband's murder to rest.

First, an anonymous caller had claimed credit for killing Irfan, days before his body was ever found. Second, crank calls to the Hussein household started just after he disappeared, continued for days, but ended abruptly an hour after his body was found but before police released any news that his body had been found. Third, another journalist had been murdered in Delhi in the month preceding Irfan's death, her body suffering almost the exact same wounds as Irfan's. The MOs were the same. The other journalist was murdered in her home: no car jacking was involved.

When the police reconcile or even address these outstanding features of the case, then Cartoonists Rights Network and Dr. Hussein will gain confidence in the police's commitment to getting to the bottom of the case.

CRN was able to send a modest sum to Mrs. Hussein as a result of the auctioning of one of his cartoons at that year's annual Cartoons and Cocktails event in Washington, DC.

The late Irfan Hussein and his wife in a photo taken shortly before his death.

THE BLANK PAGE

Andrew 'Chev' Cheverton gets all punk on our asses...

Punk (1) noun, *a youth movement of the late 1970s characterised by anti-establishment slogans and outrageous clothes and hairstyles.*

ONE definition of the word "punk" that you don't seem to be able to find in the dictionary is that of a noun modifier with regard to aesthetics, an attitude towards creation that favours originality and voice over mass appeal and production.

Here's the thing: I was in my local comic shop buying junk I don't need when a young man approached the manager to show him a comic that he had produced. Asking whether there were any review copies available, I was given a copy without further question. It was my first freebie. My second freebie followed about twenty seven seconds later when another young man asked for what magazine I reviewed; I told him Borderline and he gave me a copy of his comic that the manager had also been given to look at. The comics were Skinned Rabbit and Oddcases and they are reviewed in this issue.

They were two very different comics, but they both made me think of punk, in that sense of independence and ambition and the urge to create. In fact, Oddcases as a comic seems to belie punk, with its old ladies doing exorcisms, but behind its genesis is something we seem to have lost in mainstream comics. The creator of Skinned Rabbit even apologises for his "badly spelt badly drawn mess", which is something the Sex Pistols never did. Can you imagine Johnny Rotten leaning over the mike and saying, "I'm sorry that my vocal style ranges from screaming to growling with little variation in between; the drummer is only as good as any other rock drummer, the guitarist will play three chords in whatever order he likes, when he likes regardless of what song the rest of us are doing and the bass player isn't too bad, although he is as likely to twat a member of the audience with the bass as play it, so you may want to get your heads down if the bass line stops without warning."?

When you stop to think about it, the monthly production line way of modern comics doesn't support a wholly creative atmosphere. Donna Tartt followed up her 1992 novel The Secret History with this year's The Little Friend, and was perplexed in interviews as to why she was expected to defend such a long absence from the shelves of bookstores. The author of The Beach, Alex Garland, wrote two novels [plus the *28 Days Later* screenplay... Ed] and then decided to spend the rest of his life backpacking and playing *Tetris*. Yet people seem to think they *owe* us more books. Similarly, the vast majority of mainstream comics are produced as a set number of pages, published every four weeks. (Unless you're Kevin Smith.)

It occurs to me (and God knows I'm not the first it's occurred to, nor am I the first to comment on it) that perhaps this restrictive format may be more of a burden than even we think. It's an expensive, minority-interest medium at best, stifling the accessibility of comics to consumers accustomed to product delivered in one package, but maybe it's also hindering the creator. As well as creating, writing and drafting a story to perfection, a comic writer is also on a strict, short deadline.

"Do you want it good, or do you want it Tuesday?" the writer asks. "We want both," the publisher replies, "We want it good and we want it *last* Tuesday." This may have worked back in the heady days of the '60s when Stan Lee could write all of Marvel's comics on a 9 to 5 shift, and still get weekends to himself, but we live in a world where J Scott Campbell can only draw six pages a year and Kevin Smith rolls around the comic convention and film festival circuits soaking up the love, despite the fact that we have yet to read half the comics he's meant to have written and his last two movies stank like fish.

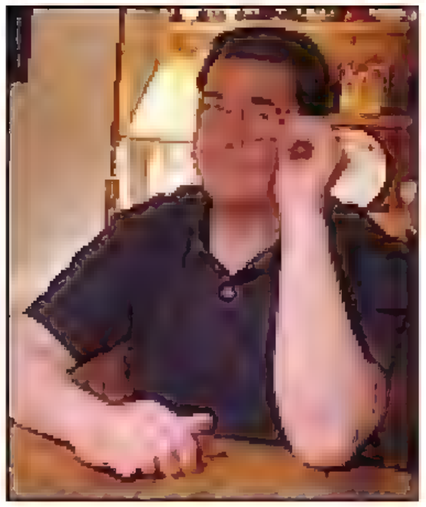
But I've just read two comics, entirely different from each other but both wholly satisfactory, even though - or maybe even *because* - they were, to all intents and purposes, handmade. They were written and drawn and printed when they were done and ready, and there won't be another one until that's done and ready too: although, now that I think about it, maybe that credo does apply to Kevin Smith's work as well.

And the irony here is that the comics of yesteryear - the Fantastic Fours and the Amazing Spider-Mans - were designed to be disposable; you'd spend your 20 cents, read the comic, swap with your friends and then throw it away. But many people never did. Today, comics cost ten times the price and are more disposable than ever before.

Punk (2) noun, *dried decayed wood that smoulders when ignited: used as tinder.*

Above: Skinned Rabbit, not the Sex Pistols

THE JOHN WAGNER INTERVIEW



WAGNER'S WALK

BACK in the mists of time, at DreddCon 2 in the wilds of Nottingham last year, ***Borderline****'s Jay Eales caught up with one of the mainstays of the British comics industry, John Wagner, and arranged an interview with him. Reticent when it comes to doing interviews, and always busy, John graciously agreed to be interviewed about his long career via email over a period of months. We can now unveil the result. Readers who thought that Wagner's career begins and ends with* Judge Dredd *and* Strontium Dog *may be in for a surprise…*

Borderline: *Do you have any unfulfilled ambitions inside comics?*
John Wagner: Putting together a new **Bogie Man** series is high on my list at the moment. Unfortunately there aren't many avenues available for such an oddball story. We've considered publishing it ourselves, but the last time we tried self-publishing we only succeeded in losing money, and that's a road I'm not in a hurry to travel again. Andy Diggle agreed to publish a new series in **2000AD**, but I felt Bogie would be too out of place there. However, I've been having discussions with Alan Barnes about Bogie in the **Megazine**. It's a much broader mix now and they have room to accommodate the odd exception as long as the quality's right, so I wouldn't be so concerned about Bogie not fitting in.

BL: *Do you have any unfulfilled ambitions outside comics?*
JW: I've been intending to write a novel. I like working in pure text and it would be lovely to devote six months or a year to a single story. So far the right idea hasn't come along, but I'm thinking about it.

BL: *Which piece of your own work are you most proud of?*
JW: Proud… I dunno. I'm happy with a lot of the characters and stories I've created but I don't think anything I've done is perfect. In terms of affection probably **The Bogie Man** comes first. Not all my own work, being a Grant/Wagner co-production, but it's the one closest to home so I have a special attachment to it.

BL: *What's the oddest day job you've ever done?*
JW: It was a night job, working twelve-hour shifts in a pipe-coating factory for the North Sea Oil fields. Horrible work. A writer's life can be difficult, when the ideas don't flow, but a job like that makes you realise how lucky you are.

BL: *If you were able to ban one question from all future interviews, what would that question be?*
JW: "Where do you get your ideas from?". I've probably heard that a thousand times. Actually, I have a crack ideas team imprisoned in my garden shed. A useable storyline a day or they don't eat. They've been going very hungry lately.

BL: *How do you see comics changing in the next few years?*
JW: I'm a pessimist, I can't see anything ahead but continued decline. I know little about American comics, can't speak for them, but here the market has shrunk and we've been doing little over the past decade to bring on a new generation of readers. These days **2000AD** stories, for instance, tend to be aimed at existing readers. There's little attempt to bring younger readers into the fold, and they seem to be getting out of the habit. This is sad. Comics - particularly British comics - gave me a lot of enjoyment in my younger days.

BL: *Name a comic we should be reading.*
JW: What can I say? **2000AD**. Still in there plugging after all these years.

The Megazine's looking pretty good these days too. I like the mixture of feature and strip - David Bishop did an excellent job on his history of **2000AD**. Wouldn't mind seeing more relevant feature material - makes for a chunkier read.

BL: *Name something that is overrated.*
JW: Most movies. They seem to have lost the habit of telling a good story. Or maybe I'm just getting old and jaded.

BL: *Why are you working in comics instead of another form?*
JW: It's the field I stumbled into, never had quite enough desire to change things. Though it's had its down times, writing comics has generally been a lot of fun. It's a pretty good way to make a living and less stressful, I imagine, than alternatives. Still, must get around to that novel...

BL: *Movie adaptations – a bad idea, or take the money and run?*
JW: Sometimes it works, sometimes not. Moviemakers are all too quick to discard the elements of a comic story that made it work. There's a tendency, too, to feel they can do without a decent story altogether. I haven't seen any of the latest batch, but two I thought worked were *The Crow* and *The Mask*.

BL: *Outside of comics, where do your talents lie?*
JW: You know, apart from writing I'm not sure I have any. Being grumpy, I suppose. I'm very good at that.

BL: *Over the years, you've worn many different hats for any number of publishers. What's the favourite period of your career and why?*
JW: Probably the late Eighties, first half of the Nineties. I was at my most productive then, turning out a lot of material that I still look back on with some pleasure – *America*, *Young Death*, **The Megazine**, *Al's Baby*, *Button Man*, **A History of Violence**, **The Bogie Man**. Though there's always the problem of where the next idea or next job is going to come from,

being freelance has been much preferable to working editorial. Editorial is a thankless task. Work every hour of the day and you still won't make your comic as good as you know it can be. Then there are deadlines, and umpteen uncooperative freelances to deal with – egomaniacs, sluggards, liars, incompetents, young and old, all with their different reasons for not turning their work in on time, or turning in crap, all ready to argue with you. Then there are the readers, never satisfied...

I'm presenting the job at its worst. There are of course rewards in editorial, including the "wow" factor when one of those irritating freelances turns up with something that's out of this world - but give me the freelance life anytime.

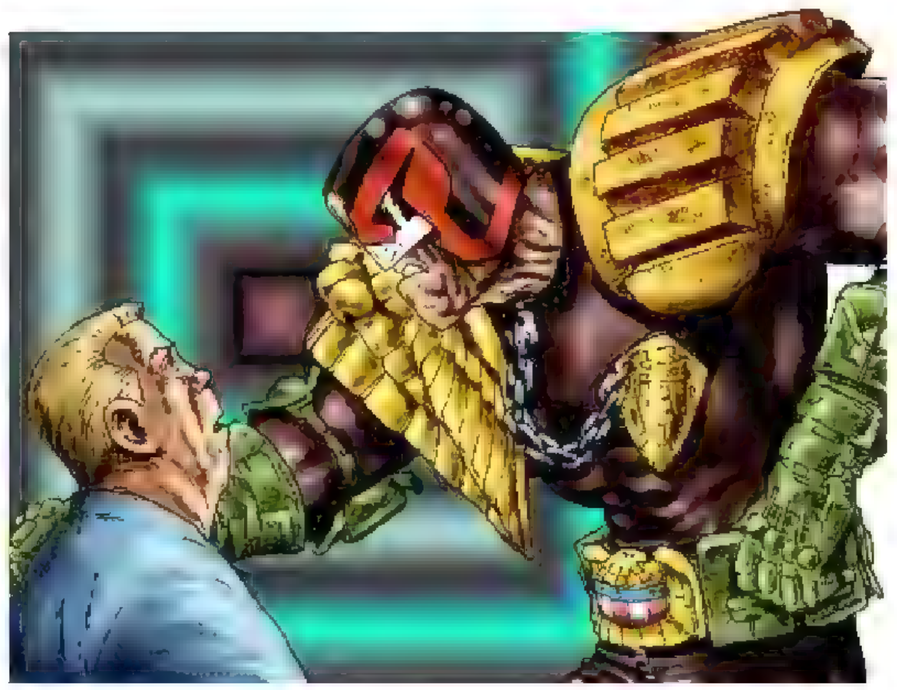
BL: *Can you give us the flavour of what it was like to work in the British comics industry when you were, say, editor of* ***Valiant****, compared with the way it is today?*
JW: There were a lot more comics about, with lower cover prices and much higher circulations. For the freelance there was no shortage of work and the rates were higher in comparison with today. Comics had more staff, usually five, with an editor and two sub-editors plus an art editor and lay-out man, so an editor had more time to spend developing stories. Unfortunately, not a lot of this was happening, at least on the boys' side of IPC's comics division.

Within IPC there were two distinct groups presided over by managing editors. On the girls' side John Purdie had done a lot to instil a more creative, self-critical approach to his comics, but the boys' side, run by Jack Le Grand, was seen to be lagging behind. Stories would run forever with little change and innovation. The comics had become stale and formulaic and were losing market share to their big rivals at DC Thomson. There was a lot of tension between the two groups, the boys' side suspicious that the girls' side had designs to move in on them. When John Purdie brought Pat Mills and me in to do **Battle Picture Weekly**, with the approval of Managing Director John Sanders, those suspicions would seem to have been confirmed.

There was the issue too of violence. The old school thought we were going way over the top, Pat and I felt we were justifiably reacting against the slapstick, absurd approach of strips like *Captain Hurricane*, where violence never had consequences and warfare was reduced to a jolly jape.

Some made their opposition known to your face, which was fine - you could have a reasoned discussion with them and if they didn't in the end agree with you they could at least see you weren't some kind of monster and did care about the values of the stories you were putting out. Others did it more surreptitiously. We were so wrapped up in what we were doing that we didn't realise quite how deep the resentment was. I remember one evening near Christmas when Pat and I had been working late in Old Fleetway House. As we were leaving we noticed a clipping from a comic strip taped to our door - presumably one of our own strips - showing flamethrower men giving victims a roasting. Over it had been pasted "And a Merry Christmas to All Our Readers".

By that time Dave Hunt and Steve MacManus had moved over to **Battle** and Purdie's group from the boys' side and adapted to the new approach with some enthusiasm, so we felt we couldn't be doing things that badly. The change in IPC's comics happened despite



the opposition. Eventually I came to edit one of Jack Le Grand's titles, **Valiant**, and got to know and like Jack. A hard-drinking ex WWII glider pilot, he used to regale me with stories of shooting "Jocks" in the back in Normandy. Jack liked getting under your skin. He was still no supporter of what was happening with his comics but he was too long in the tooth to try to push back the waves. He took great amusement, I think, from watching all the tensions at play in the office. A real character.

There was much more socialising in those days, with so many more people working in comics. This was especially true when **2000AD** came along, staff and freelances regularly getting together. It helped to engender the strong team spirit and good-natured competitiveness that became one of the driving forces behind the comic.

BL: *In days of yore you wrote for girls' comics... what sort of stories did you write for them?*

A selection of images from Wagner's career, including the above from his days on girls' comics and *School For Snobs*, which he created...

JW: Not terrifically good ones. Pat and I started out working from his garden shed across the Tay from Dundee. The first girls' story we wrote was about the Irish potato famine. It was a bit heavy-handed and though I did eventually use it when I edited **Sandie**, its main function was as an introduction to John Purdie.

Before Pat and I split up we had done the first two or three episodes of a story called *School for Snobs*, which was pretty good. It was about a school where girls with attitude problems were straightened out by vulgar headmistress Hermione Snook and in the true girls' comic tradition much more interested in psychology than action. I left that one in Pat's capable hands and went down to London, initially as a freelance working within the offices of IPC at Fleetway House and then as editor of **Sandie**. The only thing of note I wrote in that time was a story called, I kid you not, *Jeanie and Her Uncle Meanie*, about an orphan girl living with her tightwad Scottish uncle. We weren't very PC in those days.

I was more suited to boys' stories, though I took a lot of girls' story techniques with me when I crossed the big divide. Pat was the one with the real touch for the girls' side. He went on to write quite a few good ones and had a hand, if I remember rightly, in the creation of **Misty**, a girls' mystery title.

BL: *It's my understanding that you and Pat Mills worked on **Tammy**, which was a new launch in February 1971, and was pretty successful for IPC throughout the '70s. IPC have since claimed that **Tammy** was a new departure for them, based on some market research which indicated that girls wanted to read "stories that made them cry." Were you mainly involved in **Tammy** or in other girls titles too, such as **June** or **Princess Tina**, or the early '70s IPC launches **Pixie** and **Pink**?*

JW: **Tammy** was ongoing when Pat and I started freelancing. I had nothing to do with **Tammy** editorial, nor as far as I know did Pat, though the Irish potato famine story was aimed at **Tammy** and *School for Snobs* published in it. I didn't write any other stories for **Tammy** but I believe Pat did a few. The editor at the time was Gerry Finlay-Day, who scripted quite a few stories himself.

I edited **Sandie**, which was also ongoing at the time I joined IPC. Management decided to merge **Sandie** with **Tammy** while it was still circulating something in the region of 180,000 copies a week – the economics of comics were different in those days. Another editor was moved in to handle the merge and I was moved on to revamp **Princess Tina**. **Princess Tina** was ailing, stuck in a time warp, but I doubt I did it any good with my revamp. At that time I was, I think, the juvenile division's youngest ever editor. They seemed to have an absurd faith in my abilities, but half the time I didn't know what I was doing. "Pop goes Tina" was the theme and in the end it did go pop, out of existence, and I popped off too, to Scotland where I took over from Alan Grant as unpaid caretaker of a mansion in Cromarty.

BL: *Do you recall anything about the market research thing mentioned above – was there an editorial directive to turn out tearjerkers, and if not, what kind of editorial line, if any, was there?*

JW: I don't remember the research, but the conclusions are pretty accurate, girls do expect a deeper emotional involvement with a story. It hardly needed research, they only had to look at what made DC Thomson titles work. **Mandy**, **Judy**, **Diana**, but especially **Bunty** led the way with a nice mixture of light and meatier tales. In IPC there was a division, **Tammy** being John Purdie's first title in the DCT mould, **Sandie** following and later **Misty** – while at the same time a couple of old school editors continued to produce **June & School Friend** and **Princess Tina** in the same old way.

BL: *What, (apart from get paid!), did you want to do with the girls' comics – was there anything you hated and wanted to chuck out; any new direction you wanted to go in?*

JW: I wasn't that deeply committed to the girls' side, it was just a way to make a living. The

Ezquerra's Strontium Dog!

boys' side engaged my interest much more - perhaps partly because I did bring a lot of girls' story techniques to it and, within IPC at least, there was so much room for improvement.

BL: *Do you know if IPC deliberately went in for circulation boosting at that time? That is, were they deliberately launching titles that were intended to merge with similar, stronger selling titles... unless the new launches happened to succeed on their own account, of course! Both* ***Star Lord*** *and* ***Tornado*** *looked very like that - both folded after precisely six months and had a couple of strips merged into* ***2000AD****.*
JW: I don't believe they ever launched titles with the definite aim of merging them. There was always the hope that a launch would stand on its own feet. However, they knew full well that the chances they'd be merging it before too long were pretty high. Those were the economics of comics as produced by IPC. What they failed to appreciate was that quality actually mattered - or perhaps it was that they didn't actually recognise quality. Most new comics seemed to be slapped together too quickly, in hope, rather than with any insight into what the readers really wanted. Again, it was old school vs. new approach. Look at the comics that did have some legs - **Battle Picture Weekly**, **Action** (agreed, it didn't last that long, but that was for other reasons), **2000AD**. These were worked on long and hard, stories analysed and re-analysed, lame dogs discarded - and it paid off. In fairness to the MD John Sanders, he recognised the difference - hence the formation of Purdie's girls' comic group, bringing Pat and me in to do **Battle**, and especially Pat with **Action** and **2000AD**.

BL: *It's a commonly held viewpoint these days that the future of the comics medium is the trade paperback, and that the old pamphlets will disappear. Do you agree?*
JW: I don't know, I hope not. There's something special about a comic, especially cheap bumph paper British ones, which sadly you don't see anymore.

BL: *You've taken sabbaticals from characters like Dredd and Johnny Alpha, but they always manage to lure you back, and you always seem to find something new to say. What makes these characters so special?*
JW: It's probably because they're mine and I still do have something new to say about them. Couldn't say the same about, for instance, *Robohunter*. Sam may be my character but I don't feel I have anything more to offer him.

BL: *What's a typical working day like for you?*
JW: I like to be at my desk by nine. In the morning I deal with correspondence, phone calls and anything else I can find to delay the awful moment I have to get to work. I might mess around on the Internet for a couple of hours, go out and feed the chickens, make umpteen coffees. The speed with which I get down to real work is an indicator of how much I'm enjoying it. It's *Strontium Dog* today, *The Tax Dodge* part 4. Tricky episode, but the story's working well and I'm enjoying it so I'll probably get started before ten. I'll normally work till about five with a short break for lunch, though it depends a lot on the nature of the work. New stories - blank sheet days - can mess your head up till you get to grips with them. If things aren't going well I've learned to stop when further effort would be unproductive. It's really useful to walk away from a story and come back to it fresh.

So, a pretty normal, fairly disciplined working day. One tends to picture freelances as wild spirits, but in reality could you make a living at it if you didn't have some discipline in your working life?

BL: *The Stallone* Dredd *movie was almost universally panned by critics and audiences alike. Rather than dwelling on the many faults of the film, do you think that they got anything right?*
JW: Their computer recreation of the city was very good. Someone told me that the movie had actually started making a profit for its producers, with videos, DVDs and the Far East market.

BL: Button Man, *the creator-owned series you did with Arthur Ranson, remains another big fan favourite, regularly topping reader polls to determine which classic strips should be reprinted, and yet it remains missing from Titan Books' schedules. Any idea why?*
JW: Because it's creator-owned, not part of Titan's block deal with Rebellion. Titan has always been of the opinion, too, that my name doesn't sell comics. Generally only if I'm working with a "hot" artist will they put anything out. I guess they know their market. *Button Man 1*, *The Killing Game*, will however be published this December by Rebellion.

BL: *Over three* Button Man *series, the protagonist Harry Exton seems to have become a darker figure - less heroic - perhaps even psychopathic. Is the character being*

Henry Flint artwork from Aliens/Dredd: Incubus.

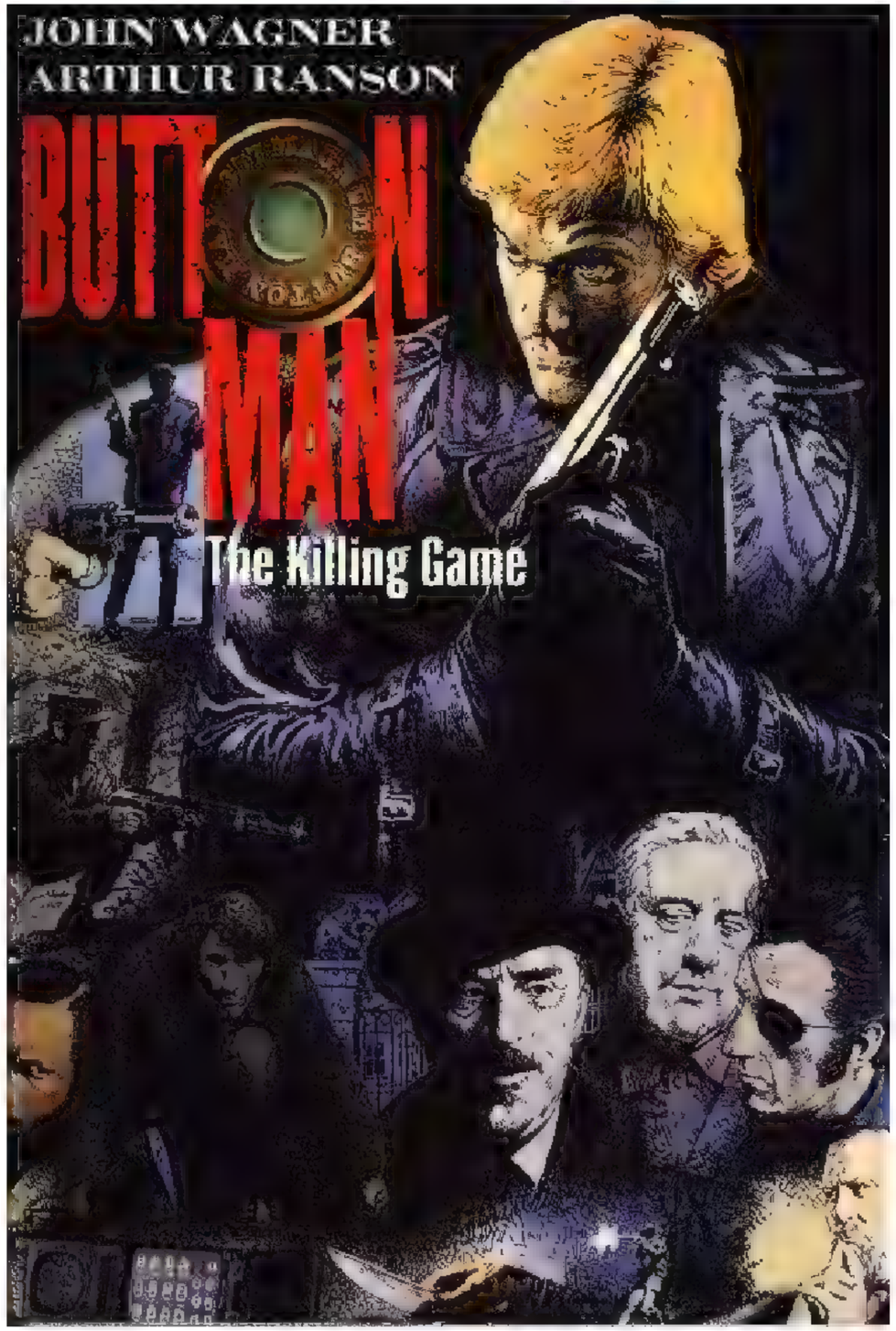
shaped by his involvement in the Game, or has he always been this way, and he's becoming less able to mask it?
JW: Don't think Harry's basic nature's changed. I've always seen him as a borderline psychopath. When things are going well that's easier to mask, but the Game of course can bring out the worst in a man.

BL: Button Man *has been under option as a movie before. What's the current state of play on that, and what other Wagner creations are currently optioned?*
JW: You no doubt know by now that **A History of Violence** has been optioned by New Line. This doesn't mean you'll see it on your screens - probably fewer than one in a hundred properties optioned actually make it to film. But the story was designed to be a movie, and considering the success of the other Paradox book, **Road to Perdition**, I have to feel it has a better than average chance.

Button Man was optioned in the mid-90s by Lakeshore, but they couldn't get a script together in time and the option lapsed. Subsequently David Hasselhoff wanted to option it, but we didn't take that one up – couldn't somehow see David as Harry. So at the moment *Button Man* is still available. Though it would make a good movie, it seems to me it would be an even better TV series, allowing producers to change the lead character whenever a particular story arc had run dry - or the lead actor started asking for too much money.

BL: *And bringing things forward to your current and future projects: what are you working on at the moment, for Rebellion and other publishers?*
JW: I've just written a one-off Boba Fett [story] for Dark Horse (with Cam Kennedy). Today I'm finishing off a new *Strontium Dog* series, which I'm pretty pleased with. That won't appear in the comic for a while, though, as Carlos won't start on it till the new year. There's a number of *Dredd*s on the schedule, of course, including perhaps an exploration of the origins of the judicial system and events surrounding the Great War - if I can steel my nerve to do it.

BL: *With over 25 years of continuity, and several writers to take account of, that would be a monumental undertaking, but certain to be hotly anticipated by readers. Would this connect with Alan Grant's aborted* Armageddon: The Bad Man *story from a few years back, which I believe was intended to lead up to the birth of the Judges, or would you start from scratch? Actually, was there any truth to the rumour that as* Armageddon *was being done as a creator-owned project, it was halted because it would have given a strong case to wresting Dredd's ownership from Fleetway, given that it would be an origin story for the whole Dredd universe?*



JW: That could never have happened. I think it was felt that a major portion of Dredd's backstory shouldn't be told in a creator-owned piece, which I'm in total agreement with. It would have complicated the situation with regard to anything said in *The Bad Man*, but not the rest of the *Dredd* continuity. I'm not sure if that was why Alan didn't go any further with *The Bad Man*, or just that he saw the monumental nature of the task and crapped out. I would have. The idea is frankly very scary - it's why I've not yet tackled it in all these years of *Dredd*, and I'm still wondering if I should do it. Part of the idea for the story came from Robin Low, who was going to post the suggestion to the 2000AD Newsgroup but kindly agreed not to when I said I might well use it. I've enlisted the help of William Logan from *Class of '79* to collate everything that's ever been said about the origins of the system. He knows Dredd's history better than I do. There are, I'm sure, terrible contradictions.

I'm also involved with Alan Grant, Cam Kennedy and Alastair Swinnerton (creator of the *Bionicles*) in developing a series for animation.

BL: ***Judge Dredd/Aliens: Incubus*** *is being co-published by Rebellion and Dark Horse, starting in* ***2000AD****'s Christmas special, Prog 2003, and weekly thereafter - how many episodes/ pages does it run, and how many Dark Horse issues will there be?*
JW: 16 x 6 episodes in **2000AD**, 4 Dark Horse books.

BL: *Do you know how the schedule will work out? Will* ***2000AD*** *get the first printing, with its weekly publication, or will Dark Horse beat them to the punch, with their larger compilations?*
JW: I'm not certain but I think most of it will be published in **2000AD** before the Dark Horse books come out.

BL: *How far along are you with* ***Incubus****?*
JW: We've written up to part ten. Not sure where Henry is on the art, but he's going at it full steam.

BL: *How have you found the experience of working with a new co-writer, in the form of Andy Diggle?*
JW: It's difficult, especially as most of it's been done by telephone or email - at my insistence rather than Andy's. I'm a reluctant traveller and I hate business meetings. It's resulted in more work for both of us. Still, it's working out okay in the end. We're producing a pretty good script that does justice to the aliens. Henry's art is terrific too.

BL: *What does Andy bring to the table as far as* ***Incubus*** *goes?*
JW: In-depth knowledge of aliens, enthusiasm, a lot of creative energy. He knows the judges and his take on the aliens is excellent - inventive and gory. It would be a lesser story without him.

BL: *In your famous writing partnership with Alan Grant, you used to work in the same office, (and previous to that, with Pat Mills in his garden shed), and whoever typed up the story got the credit. Given the distance between Andy and yourself, how was the division of labour worked out?*
JW: We got together to work the story out in outline and the first episode in some detail, then batted the synopsis back and forth via email till we and the licensors were happy with it. Scripts too we batted back and forth till both were happy with them. Initially the idea was to write separate books, but that's got a bit mixed up now. A pretty laborious process, but we're getting there.

BL*: There have been whispers from* ***2000AD****'s Nerve Centre that we're about to see the death of a major character from Dredd's world. Would you care to tease us a little more as to what's coming up for Old Stoney Face?*
JW: No.

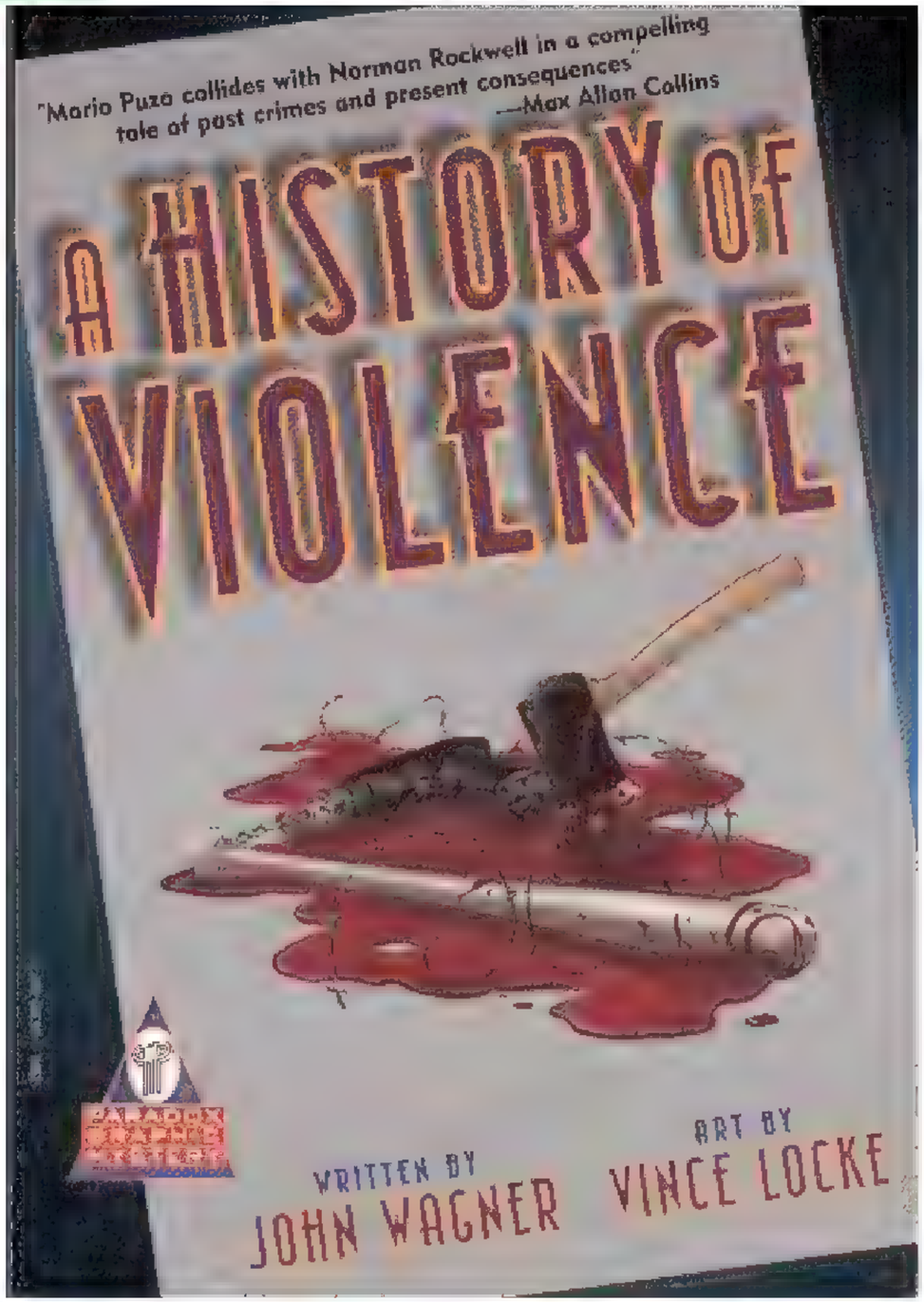
BL: *Given the cloud surrounding the Stallone* Dredd *movie, Rebellion have assured readers that they intend to remain true to the concept this time, with two new films in development, to be filmed back to back in order to maximise the budget. Are you more involved in any capacity with these than the previous outing?*
JW: No, less I'd say.

BL: *Was that your choice, or have they not approached you about it?*
JW: We met once in Oxford, during which meeting the project was discussed. I've had no involvement since. If I'm honest, I'm not certain I'd want to write a *Dredd* movie. To do it well would be very difficult. Personally, I'd like to see what Alan Moore did with it. He seems to have an interesting take on most things.

BL: *We've recently heard a lot of noise about Rebellion's new contracts, which allegedly require creators to waive rights to any of their* ***2000AD*** *work past or present. Alan Grant, in particular, has been quite vocal on the subject. Could we get your comments on the situation?*
JW: Alan was rightly outraged. The terms on offer effectively removed all creator rights. However, I've heard the contract was merely a discussion document. I trust that things will work themselves out. It doesn't benefit any of us in the business to start

2000 A.D.
8p
EARTH MONEY
★TOP★ THRILL
JUDGE DREDD
THE COMIC OF TOMORROW —TODAY!
DREDD'S ATTACKING THE CYBORG! BUT HE'LL GO OVER THE EDGE AND WE'RE TWO MILES UP!

Here's one you don't often see; the first time Dredd featured on the cover of a comic. From 2000AD #5, many moons ago...


"Mario Puzo collides with Norman Rockwell in a compelling tale of past crimes and present consequences"
—Max Allan Collins
A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE
WRITTEN BY
JOHN WAGNER
ART BY
VINCE LOCKE

arguing with each other.

BL: *Alan Barnes (editor of the **Judge Dredd Megazine**) has recently announced that one of your more notorious war stories,* Darkie's Mob, *is to be reprinted in the **Megazine** from January, but that some of the less "politically correct" examples of dialogue will be edited to avoid offence in these more sensitive times. Do you think it needed to be revised, or should it have stood as very much of its time, given the historical setting where the language would not have been out of place?*
JW: Alan checked with me the idea of toning it down and I agreed. Attitudes have changed, we're all more aware now. I was a callow youth then, I'd be ashamed of some of the language I used so unthinkingly. I know it was common parlance, attitudes shared by most of the British people, but that doesn't make it right.

It's a difficult line to draw, how far to go in being true to a story. For instance, the original title of **Bogie Man: Chinatoon** was "The Chinkie Syndrome". We felt that was the right title, as that's how the Chinese are referred to by a large section of the Scottish population. It's not right, but it's the way it (thankfully, decreasingly) is. But pretty early on we decided it was simply too offensive and authenticity was discarded. Was it the right decision? I think so. It would have been different if the issue had been more central to the story - if we'd been trying to make a point about racism, for instance. But we weren't. The change didn't hurt the story and we didn't feel ashamed to see it on the bookstalls. So I'm not going to apologise for the revision of *Darkie's Mob*, though many will disagree. The story's not about the Japanese, it's about a group of men trapped in a hopeless situation, and the terrible realities of war.

BL: *And in the grand tradition of* News At Ten, *ending with the silly story, Ian Gibson suggested that I should ask you about your elephant impression. I'm not entirely sure that I'm ready for the answer, but would you care to paint the picture?*
JW: It's not what you think. It's very clean and jumbo impressive. But it's an audiovisual experience, hard to do justice to in words. You'll have to catch me sometime when I've had a few pints.

DIGGLE ON WAGNER

I ASKED the former editor of 2000AD, now on the other side of the fence as a full time freelance writer – see feature elsewhere this issue - for his insight on John Wagner...

Borderline: *Could you give me a few words on your changing relationship with John Wagner – first as fan, then editor and now as co-writer?*
Andy Diggle: Obviously I've always been a fan of *Dredd* – who isn't? I had heard that John had this scary reputation, but I've always found him an absolute pleasure to work with, both as an editor and as his co-writer. I nearly fell off my chair when he suggested I co-write **Dredd/Aliens** with him. I was enormously flattered that he was willing to put that much faith in me. It's been both daunting and educational, like having personal tuition from one of the best writers in comics.

BL: *What would you say are John's greatest strengths as a writer?*
AD: He's an absolute fountain of ideas, which is just as well, because the Dredd universe eats ideas for breakfast. He has an innate and intuitive sense of story structure. He's self-critical, and won't send in a script if he doesn't think it's good enough. He can juggle numerous characters and multiple story strands effortlessly. He cares about his characters, and that makes the reader care about them too. He can sum up a whole character with a single, telling line of dialogue. His stories have heart to temper the cynicism. And he's a bloody good laugh.
John and I are about two thirds of the way through **Dredd/Aliens**. It's been a fairly slow process as John and I are working on other stuff at the same time, and there's a lot of re-jigging each other's work, which slows things down a bit. Henry's drawn about half of the story so far, and the artwork he's producing is just astonishing. It always shows when an artist is enjoying himself, and Henry's having a blast.

GIBSON ON WAGNER

The legendary artist on series such as Halo Jones, Judge Dredd, Robohunter *and more recently* Banzai Battalion *offered his own view of John Wagner, given their long association.*

Borderline: *Can you recall the circumstances of your first meeting with John?*
Ian Gibson: I believe it was in the (then new) tower block IPC building at Blackfriars (forgotten what it's called now!) - the one we later spoofed in the Tharg stories as a spaceship! John was editor of **Valiant** at the time and he filled the tiny screened cubicle that each editor was crammed into. Maybe they were allowing him less space, as the magazine was close to closing down. I did some covers for him and he offered me the chance of working on the *Death Wish* story for that mag.

BL: *What's it like working with John compared to other writers?*
IG: John knows what he's doing! It's not a matter of "professionalism", he has that too - the ability to deliver. But there's an extra something to his stories - a depth that allows for meaning as well as his sense of humour too. He is just the best!!

BL: *You've worked together many times over the years. What's your favourite collaboration?*
IG: It has to be *RoboHunter*!! Any writer that can come up with Hoagy and then throw in Stogie as a way around the "no smoking" restrictions that Fleetway adopted halfway through the *God Droid* saga, plus having us all previously enamoured of Cutie in book 1, only to kill her off, is both brave and endlessly inventive. He has a sense for what will appeal and follows through on it!

BL: *Has John mellowed over the years, or become Victor Meldrew? (I asked John what he thought his other talents were, and he said he's very good at being grumpy!)*
IG: John wears his mask of grumpiness very well, but he uses it as a foil for his sense of humour. The contrast is very effective! He's genuinely a big cuddly bear (and will rip my head off for telling everyone!!).

BL: *At your suggestion, I plucked up the courage to ask John about his elephant impression. Can I get you to explain how you got to experience the phenomenon?*
IG: It was after a party (one of the **2000AD** pool evenings that Steve MacManus used to arrange); we went back to Robin Smith's place - just Robin, his lady, John, Alan Grant and myself for a lounge about and a chat. We were all very relaxed and John sensed that we were "ripe" to be devastated by his "elephant". He was right - the surprise and delight left us falling about laughing! That was the evening that finished off my marriage, but that's another story!

BL: *At a hypothetical gathering of* ***2000AD*** *creators (of your acquaintance), past and present, who's doing what? Who's the life and soul? Who's hiding in the darkest corner? Where's John, and where are you?*
IG: Cam Kennedy is at the bar - that seems to be the only place I meet him! Mike McMahon is laughing at something - quite possibly Kevin O'Neill, who's doing something outrageous, being egged on by various former editors. Pat Mills is planning dark and mysterious things with some tender new artists that haven't learnt any better yet. Any one with any sense is talking to John, or rather listening to John. He has a habit of putting a better punchline on your anecdote than you have!! Me - I'm drifting from group to group, making sure that I tell the people I like what wonderful work they're doing. We all need to be told that we're doing it right sometimes!

OBITUARY: CHARLES DUPUIS

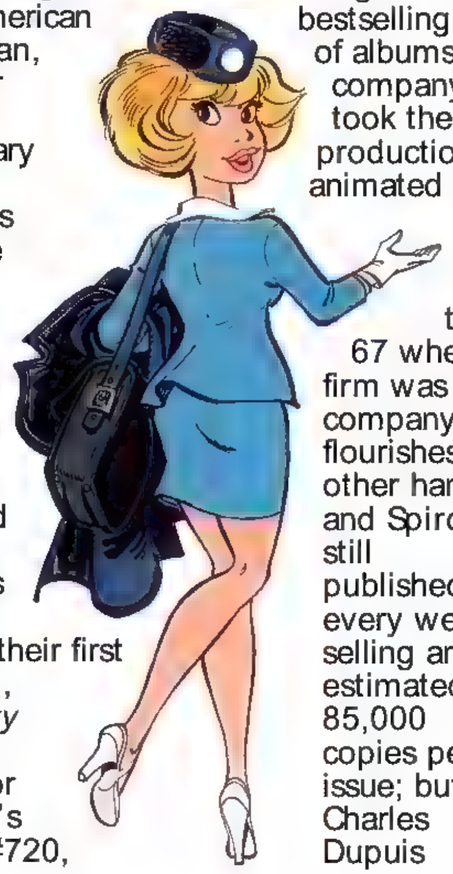
CHARLES DUPUIS, former head of the Belgian publishing concern Éditions Dupuis, died at his home in Belgium during November. He was aged 84.

His father, Jean, was already established as a publisher of popular magazines by 1937, when he decided to launch a weekly comic for children based around the exploits of a mischievous young boy. That character was duly named "Spirou" – a Belgian slang word for "squirrel" which implies a roguish quality – and in April 1938 the first issue of Spirou appeared on the stands.

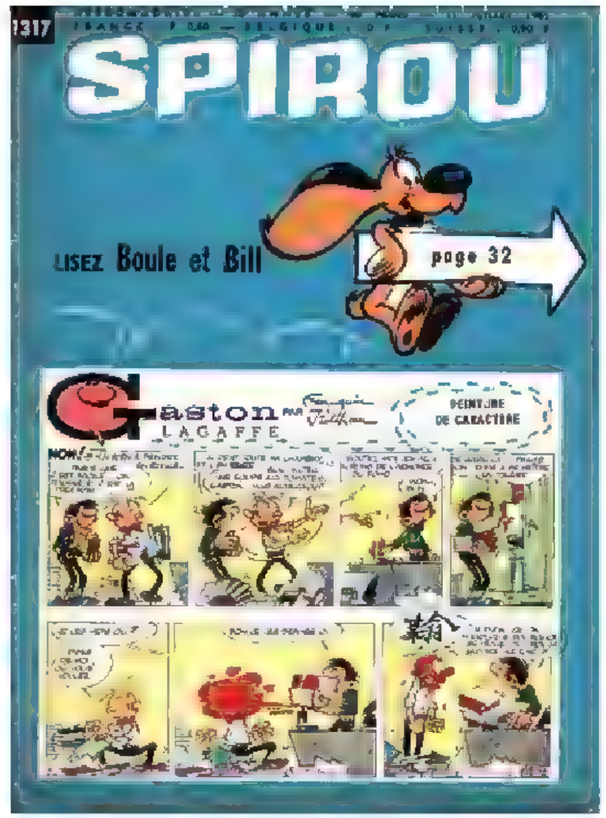
Jean Dupuis soon handed over the direction of the new comic to his sons Paul and Charles, the latter of who remained in overall charge of the Dupuis comics until his retirement in 1985. In the early years the magazine served as a home for numerous Belgian and French artists, notably Rob-Vel (artist of Spirou's adventures), but also translated for Belgian children numerous American series such as Superman, Dick Tracy, Red Ryder and Brick Bradford.

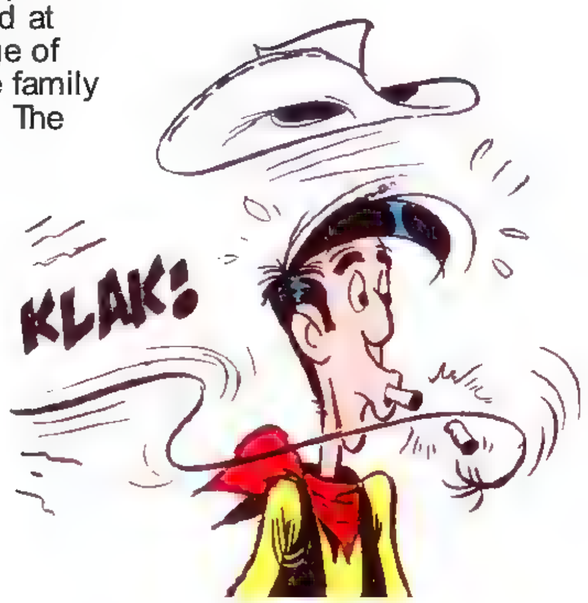
Although the primary responsibility for directions and changes within Spirou over the years were taken by a succession of illustrious chief editors, it was Dupuis who ultimately oversaw the comic's peak years of the 1950s and early 1960s. During that period, numerous popular classics of Belgian comics made their first appearances in Spirou, including Morris' *Lucky Luke* (in the annual L'Almanach Spirou for 1947) André Franquin's *Marsupilami* (Spirou #720, January 1952) and *Gaston Lagaffe* (Spirou #985, February 1957), and Peyo's *Smurfs* (Spirou #1071, October 1958). A later achievement of some significance was the introduction of the first Belgian children's series to star a sexy young heroine, François Walthéry's *Natacha* (Spirou #1663, February 1970).

During the same period Dupuis followed the example of Tintin by collecting successful series from Spirou, publishing them as albums, and thus building up a strong and still bestselling catalogue of albums for the company. He also took the firm into production of animated series for television.



Dupuis retired at the age of 67 when the family firm was sold. The company still flourishes in other hands, and Spirou is still published every week, selling an estimated 85,000 copies per issue; but Charles Dupuis ultimately takes the credit for having maintained and steadily developed the fortunes of one of the world's most productive and famous comics publishing enterprises.





LOSERS ON A WINNING STREAK?

WHEN Andy Diggle announced that he was quitting as editor of **2000AD** in order to pursue a career as a freelance writer, more than a few eyebrows were raised. In collaboration with David Bishop, he oversaw the restoration of **2000AD** to former glories. But he had only a couple of writing credits to his name (like the Mega City 1-set *Lenny Zero*), and had only been in the editor's chair for eighteen months (after two and a half years as assistant editor). Could he have been making a premature career move?

Fast forward to the present day. Diggle's star is rising in US comics, despite the fact that the first of his American projects - **Hellblazer: Lady Constantine** - won't see print until late December. Arriving hot on the heels of that will be something that melds his **2000AD** roots with his love of blockbuster movies

- co-writing **Judge Dredd/Aliens: Incubus** with John Wagner (also interviewed in this month's **Borderline**), co-published by Rebellion and Dark Horse.

After that, there's *Snow/Tiger*, a contemporary spy series for **2000AD**; and just announced is his first ongoing Vertigo series, teaming up with his *Lenny Zero* collaborator Jock (winner of 2001's Best Newcomer in the UK's National Comics Awards) on a modern reinvention of the classic DC war series **The Losers**, set to appear as part of DC's 2003 schedule. Eagle-eyed readers of the **Judge Dredd Megazine** Volume 4, issue 15 might have spotted clues to the identity of the Vertigo project, in the final page of *Lenny Zero: Wipeout*, where "The Losers" were emblazoned over billboards in the background, with the tagline "Shoot To Kill. Play To Win. Nothing To Lose." When called on it, Jock admitted: "Ahem.... sorry - I was a bit excited at the time."

From the press release on *www.andydiggle.com*: "Somebody stole America. They're gonna steal it back. Once they were soldiers. An elite Special Forces unit seconded to the C.I.A., they were the hand of America in the world's most dangerous flashpoints from Colombia to Afghanistan - and they played the game like they had nothing to lose. That is, until they stumbled across the Agency's dirty little secret - and were assassinated for it. Or so the Agency thought. Fact is, the Losers survived. Officially K.I.A. ("Killed In Action"), they went underground. They had vowed to fight for America, but uncovered a cancer at the heart of power. Now, they're back - pissed off and looking for a little payback. And they're declaring war on the Agency that stabbed them in the back. It's K.I.A. versus C.I.A., and the Losers play to win. Because when you're already dead, you've nothing to lose..."

Jay Eales spoke to Andy Diggle about the upcoming series, and has been allowed access to exclusive production illustrations from Jock's files.

Borderline: ***The Losers***? *It's* The A Team, *isn't it?*
Andy Diggle: That's what I keep hearing, but to be honest it never occurred to me while we were developing it. Originally we were going to set it in the '50s, something more in the vein of the original Rat Pack version of *Ocean's 11*, with a unit of former soldiers reuniting after World War II to plan a heist. It was only later that we moved it to the present day, and added the CIA revenge angle. Is that *The A-Team*? I'm not sure, I never really watched it.

BL: ***The Losers*** *was initially pitched as a 4 issue miniseries, wasn't it? It's a good indicator of Vertigo's faith in the book to make it ongoing. Has that required much in the way of plot re-jigging, or did you always plan to leave it open ended, in the hope of a return engagement?*
AD: I always knew we could bring the characters back for a sequel if we wanted, so it didn't require a huge rethink to make it an ongoing. The main change was in giving the characters a deeper reason for taking on this personal crusade - in a thriller, it has to be personal. The other main challenge was to come up with a huge, globe-spanning story arc. The whole story will take two or three years to tell, although it's broken up into more self-contained story arcs. I describe it as a "series of mini-series".

BL: *How are you finding Vertigo editorially, given that the crux of* ***The Losers*** *is going to be seen by some quarters as un-American in these post 9/11 days, especially in light of the way that titles like DC/Wildstorm's* ***The Authority*** *have been leaned on heavily from above?*
AD: **The Losers** is very strongly pro-American. It's just anti-corruption. It's about living up to the ideals which America espouses, and exposing those who corrupt those ideals for personal gain. It's early days yet, but so far I haven't had any kind of editorial interference regarding the more controversial content. Hopefully that will make it to the final cut. My editor Will Dennis has made things very easy for me.

BL: *Your first Vertigo project,* ***Lady Constantine****, debuts in December. Have there been any previews sent out for early feedback, do you know?*
AD: Not as far as I know, although I've posted some pages on *www.andydiggle.com*. Fortunately the advance buzz has been very positive, especially since Diamond's *Previews* picked it out as a "Gem Of The

THE LOSERS: BACK IN THE EARLY DAYS

Apart from a 1985 one-shot special, the forthcoming Vertigo series will be the first American comic to be entitled **The Losers**! Even though their logo dominated the cover of the title where they appeared for 58 issues, the hard-bitten team of World War 2 "special ops" agents technically remained a feature, albeit the only one, in DC's long-running war comic **Our Fighting Forces**, which had been up and running for 16 years before the team invaded and conquered its pages in 1970.

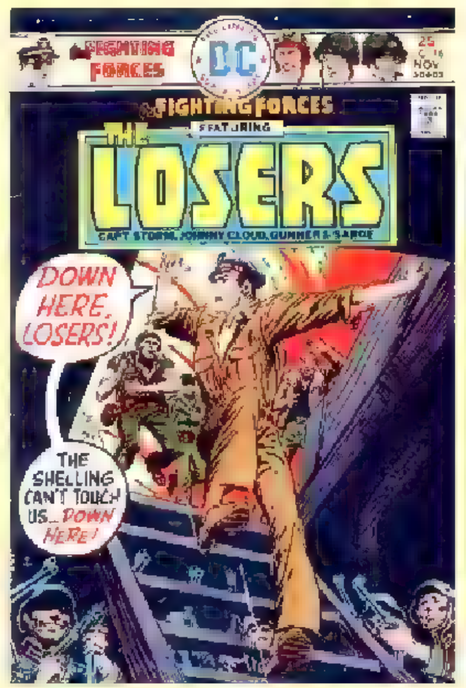
The mastermind behind the creation of *The Losers*, and most of their stories, was veteran DC editor and writer Robert Kanigher, and his concept was a typically ironic one; the team was composed of former solo characters, created by himself, whose popularity had declined over time. Banding this collection of losers together for another try-out was exactly the kind of stunt that would have appealed to Kanigher…

Team leader Captain Johnny Cloud was a Navajo Indian and air ace whose solo exploits had appeared in **All-American Men Of War** # 82-115. The two man team of Gunner and Sarge had first appeared in # 67 of **All-American Men Of War** before transferring to **Our Fighting Forces** for a fifty issue run, #45-94, during the 1960s. PT boat commander Captain Storm had starred in 18 issues of his own title from 1964 to 1967. In late 1969 Kanigher put them all together as a "special ops" group representing each branch of the US armed forces, gave them a try-out in **G.I Combat** #138, and shortly after launched them on an 8 year run in **Our Fighting Forces** #123-181. Their brief reappearance in 1985 was a last tip of the hat; shortly thereafter they were eliminated from the DC Universe in **Crisis on Infinite Earths**.

For a while, though, they'd flourished as much as any war comics characters did during the 1970s, enlivened by a nice line in comradely, if disgruntled dialogue and an intriguing status as a team who operated outside the standard military lines and succeeded in their missions as often by accident or by dumb luck as by design. Art by John Severin or Sam Glanzman in most issues didn't hurt either – but the *Losers* stories now most sought by fans and collectors are the dozen issues written, drawn and edited by Jack Kirby from 1974 to 1975.

Kirby took on the series as a contractual obligation – he was averse to handling characters created by others (and it's highly likely that Kanigher wasn't keen on Kirby handling his creations!), but his contract called for him to draw what by current standards seems like the incredible amount of 15 pages per week! By 1974 his only remaining series was **Kamandi**, and publisher Carmine Infantino was unwilling to try any new ongoing Kirby-created series, so Kirby wound up working on a war comic for the first time since **Sgt. Fury** and the **Tales of Suspense** *Captain America* stories. Despite his reluctance, and despite apparently doing zero research into the characters - as if by magic Captain Storm's wooden leg disappeared while Kirby was on the series! – he turned out a classic set of war stories which took in pathos, humour, cold-blooded action and viscerally explosive violence. And in **Our Fighting Forces** #152 he produced what is in this writer's opinion one of the finest comics of his career, a taut, minimally-dialogued piece which amounts to a textbook example of how to keep the suspense at boiling point throughout an action-oriented comicbook.

The Losers, then, have something of a classic pedigree. It'll be interesting to see how the new series compares with its always enjoyable, occasionally illustrious predecessor.



Month". Neil Gaiman originally created the character, and the fact that he gave my writing a big thumbs-up is a boost.

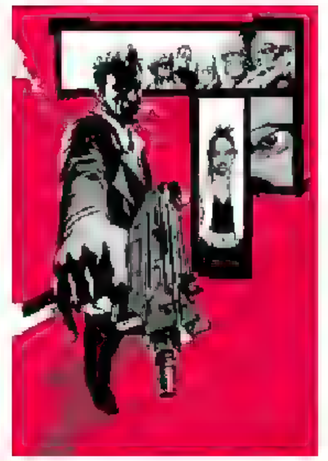
BL: *Over recent months, it has begun to look like **2000AD** is going to experience another big talent drain; besides Jock and your good self, Mike Carey is under exclusive contract to DC, Frazer Irving has been working for Dark Horse on **Fort!** and Wildstorm on **The Authority:** **Scorched Earth** with Robbie Morrison (just named as writer of the new ongoing **Authority** series), Trevor Hairsine on Marvel's **Captain America** and a whisper that Andy Clarke is about to be poached by a major US publisher. A surprising omission from that list is Henry Flint, still a mainstay of **2000AD**, but with the Rebellion/Dark Horse co-publication of **Judge Dredd/ Aliens: Incubus**, the spotlight will undoubtedly turn on him. Although it's no longer your problem, do you see this as becoming a major headache for Rebellion?*

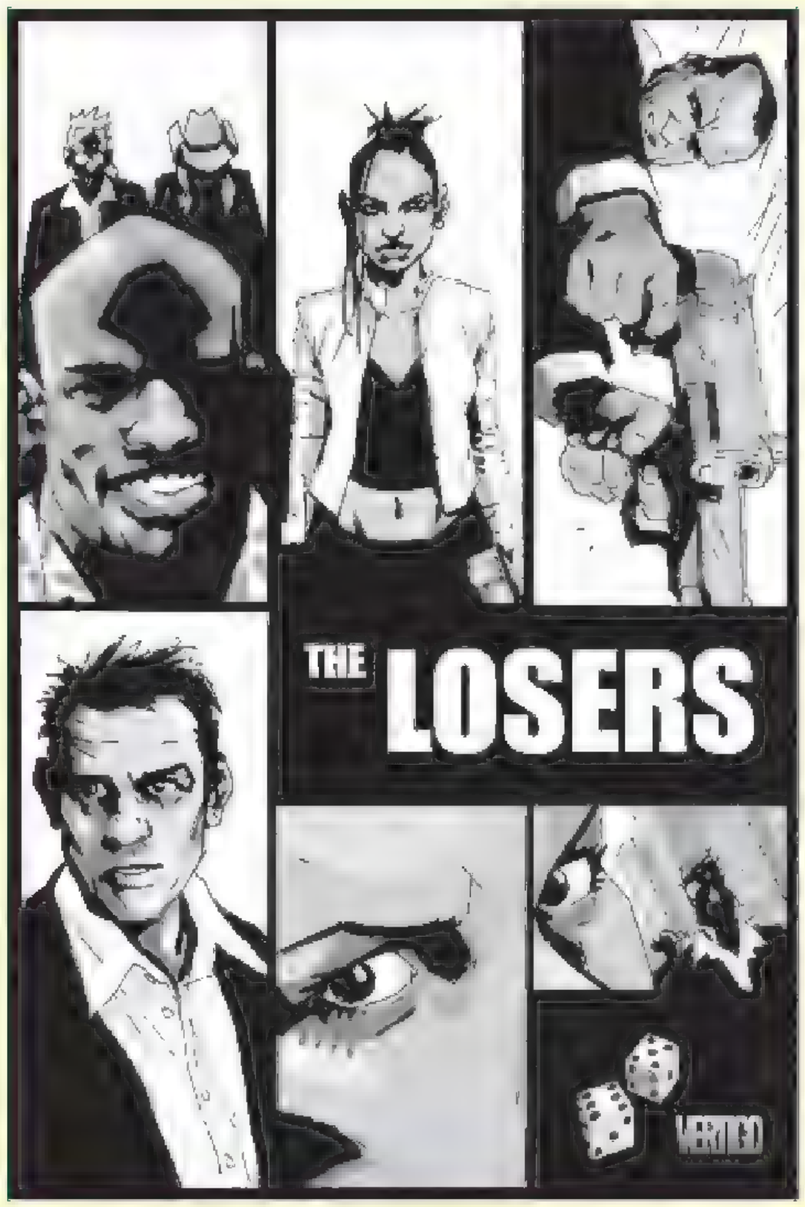
AD: It's not a problem just yet, but if they don't take steps to remedy it, it could become one down the line. Rebellion have already alienated several important creators over royalty and contract issues, and **2000AD** stopped accepting unsolicited submissions a while back. Put those two facts together and it could spell trouble.

BL: *Is **Incubus** completed yet? What about* Snow/Tiger?

AD: I finished *Snow/Tiger* back in June, although I've continued tweaking the dialogue as Andy Clarke's art comes in. The series practically wrote itself, I just flew through it. I'd initially pitched it to Vertigo, but when they said it was too "mainstream" I re-jigged it for **2000AD**. It was originally going to be a combination of edgy political comment and extreme violence.

But there wasn't room for all that in **2000AD**, so I took out all the edgy political comment and just left the extreme violence!





TWO TIME LOSERS

Courtesy of their creator, an introduction to the new look Losers.

Frank Clay
The guy behind it all is Frank Clay, former commander of the "Losers" Special Forces unit which was seconded to the CIA. The Agency tried to kill him, and he's the kind of old-school tough guy who takes that sort of thing personally. He wants to punish the Agency for what he sees as their wrongdoing - although there's an extent to which that's just an excuse for good old-fashioned payback.

Cougar
The sniper; Mexican and a real dark horse. He witnessed something during the backstory that affected him deeply, and he has rarely, if ever, spoken since. He has ghosts he needs to lay to rest.

Pooch
The transportation guy; an expert pilot and driver. He's a very laid back guy, slow to anger, who always tries to see the wider picture. He's also a devoted family man, or used to be.

Jensen
The systems guy; a hacker who joined the unit during operations against high-tech drug traffickers in South America.

He's antsy, and talks too much when he's nervous. For him it's all about the thrill of the hunt - he's not the kind of guy who plans ahead. He's the youngest and least jaded of the Losers. Perhaps even a little naive.

Roque
The demolitions expert; a terse, practical, bloody-minded sort of guy. He's a bulldog - once he gets his teeth into something, he never lets go. Metaphorically speaking, that is.

Aisha
A beautiful Afghan warrior who grew up fighting the Russian invaders and became a CIA "asset". She's a real tough cookie, not someone you'd want to mess with. She has her own motives for joining the Losers, and hidden agendas which aren't immediately clear.

CONNECTING WITH COM.X

Borderline's *Mike Sivier logs onto the new Com.X website to find basic standards of spelling and grammar suffering in the glare of consumerism.*

Good ol' Bazooka Jules - not really a sexist superheroine, is she?

LET'S get one thing straight: I don't have anything against Com.X. The company may have launched with a flagship character who looks like an over-pumped inflatable doll with Band-Aids over her nipples, but that matters not a jot to me. It's misleading to judge a book by its cover - and besides, I've seen **Cla$$war** receive strongly positive reviews. It was with an open mind, then, that I connected to the Com.X website at *www.comxcomics.com* - only to find myself sucked into what must have been a timewarp. Suddenly it was the early 1990s again and the speculator market was back in fashion.

I suppose I should have seen this coming from the press release. For starters, it didn't even mention the fact that it was about comics until the end of the second paragraph.

"*Hindsight is both a wonderful and dreadful thing,*" the release begins. "*It gives us a joyously morbid window to reflect on our mistakes, to cogitate on our cock-ups. Now that you can only afford a moderately-sized rabbit hutch in London, not buying the flat in Soho 10 years ago turns out to have been a bad decision. Swapping your collection of Penny Black stamps for a Tamagochi seemed like a good idea at the time but it's clear now that it wasn't one of your best. The problem is that we usually don't know what to invest in, what to collect and what to discard until it's too late.*"

What to invest in. Oh yes. An appeal to the comics speculator. But didn't the comics speculator die a few years ago, buried under a pile of chromium foil-encrusted multi-covers and trading cards?

"*That is until now. If the property market is too rich for your blood but you still want a nice little earner, the hot tip of the moment is... comics.*"

They talk a good fight, don't they? In fact, comics *could* be the hot tip of the moment again - look at the number of great comics-based films we're seeing in our cinemas. Translate that audience into comics sales and they'd be huge.

"*And they don't come any hotter than Britain's only independent comics publisher, com.x, whose titles are changing hands for huge sums at a speed Superman himself would be proud of. And, as if creating the superheroes of tomorrow while single-handedly taking on the might of the American comics industry wasn't enough, com.x have found time to relaunch their super-cool website.*"

This is the point of the release, and why you're reading these words.

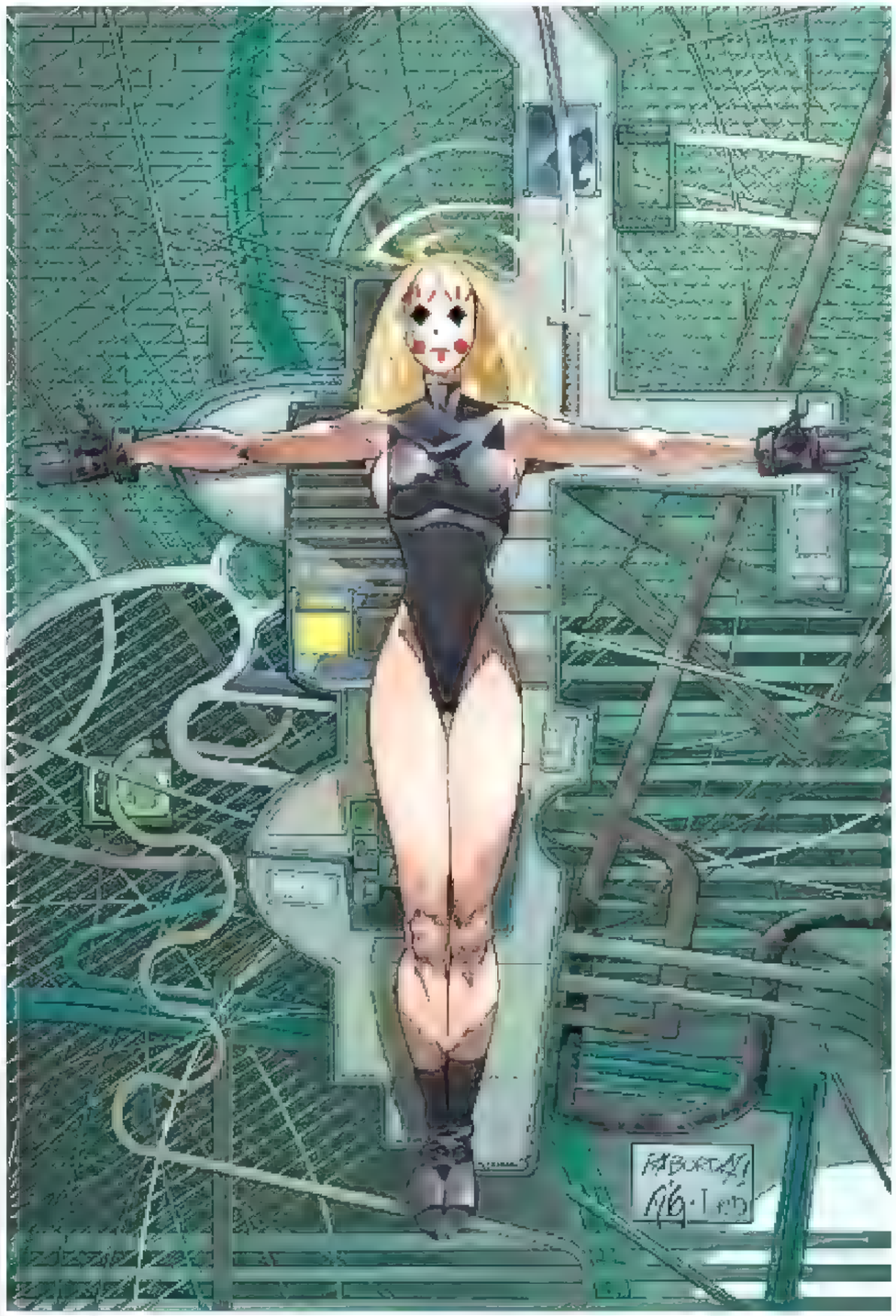
"*Now even bigger and better than ever, the site has had investors and comics collectors worldwide rushing for their wallets and snapping up limited edition com.x titles.*"

So it's a shop, then. A shop and a company website rolled into one. Despite the way the press release panders to the investor/speculator, the combination made the Com.X site worth a look. So I pointed my browser in the right direction, and this is what I found.

At first sight, it looks nice enough. Not full of flashy graphics like, say, the Marvel.com site - easy on the eye. But God, they need a proofreader! A line of 11 boxes on the bottom of the page constitute the index - with the online store first among them. According to Com.X, the online store features limited edition and signed copies of the com.x titles, along with posters and artwork. All prices are in US dollars and PayPal handles all the tricky conversion stuff. I found comics and posters, but any artwork for sale eluded me. The store section opens as a fresh page and is very harsh on the eye, with all the images and lettering set against a bright red background. Featured items appear to

include all the Com.X titles released so far, priced according to availability.

The introductory screen badly needs proofreading. It may be that it was a conscious decision to forget the occasional capital letter and to refer to the reader as "u", but the lack of simple punctuation marks like apostrophes makes this page look like it was written by a very dense schoolboy. "*if u dont have a PayPal account heres the deal*", the blurb announces to the world. The deal being, apparently, that you don't need to be able to write in order to publish comics. There follow several paragraphs dealing with how to set up an account with PayPal in order to buy the merchandise in the store, ending: "*once its done your sorted*". Each title is featured, with a cover image and a few lines of descriptive text. Here, again, Com.X needs a proofreader. Check this out, from the blurb for **Bazooka Jules** #3: "*LOONY BALLOONS IS BACK AND YOUR GONNA GET YOUR HEAD KICKED IN.*" It reads like something scrawled on an alley wall. There's more pandering to investors, too. "*Super luscious lovely chromey shiny metal mirror cover*" enthuses the copy for **Cla$$war** #1 Chrome.



Codename: Babetool - a dodgily-titled upcoming series from Com.X

As part of a comics company's web identity, the idea of an online store is great. The way it is executed here, sadly, is ugly and illiterate. Needs work – must try harder.

Moving on, we find a page of news. "*Everything you could ever want to know about this ground-breaking comics publisher,*" the press release spurts. "*The stories, the characters, the artists and writers, upcoming events, past victories - if there's something going on, you'll know about it.*" Apparently nothing's happened at Com.X since August. This could be the lifeblood of the site - but its restriction to a box covering the bottom half of the screen is limiting.

Next up is the "Development" section - a chance to check out upcoming projects, including **MonkeyBoy & Boosh**, the dodgily-titled **Codename: Babetool** and Mike McMahon's **Heavy Plant**. The section turns out to be a gallery of images from each title - mostly with the words "In Development" superimposed all over them. Clicking on each image brings forth a larger version.

In a similar vein is the "Gallery", a Com.X hall of fame full of clickable images.

The "Comics" section has pages for each of Com.X's already-released titles, with an option to see cover images for the titles which have already been released. Creator details are given, along with synopses of each series, written in prose that's so purple it's practically having an embolism. Again, poor literacy rears its head. Apparently **Bazooka Jules** is a "humerous" look at the life of a teenage girl who becomes a superhero. Seen from a small bone in the elbow, then - and even then, a badly spelt elbow bone.

A "Downloads" section features a selection of wallpapers with which to decorate your computer, and that leaves only the section named "Inside Leg". This turns out to be a page about the company, naming the main people behind it and the roles they play. Tucked away on this page is a small box bearing the word "Submissions". This is where comics enthusiasts can get involved themselves, by sending their own art or story ideas for inspection by Com.X staff. Why such a small place for potential submissions, tucked away on what is possibly the page least likely to be accessed by browsers? It's a hard question to answer.

So what's the verdict? A cautious thumbs down - for now. There's nothing wrong with the site that can't be put right with a little judicious tweaking. It shouldn't take too long to run over the site's copy and put it straight - and in a forward-moving company it shouldn't be too difficult to keep the news section current.

But the store section could do with an overhaul to make it easier on the eye and less, well, brassy.

But you can form your own conclusion about the Com.X site by pointing your browser at them!

Sky Between Branches - a sold-out one-shot with more to follow

TRANSATLANTIC MEDITATIONS

Arnold T. Blumberg – Borderline's US correspondent – looks at comics in the educational system...

"WHERE did you say you teach?"

"At the University of Maryland, where I did my undergraduate work in English."

"Oh, that's wonderful! And what do you teach there?"

"Comicbook literature."

"Oh... how... nice. Um, excuse me, I think I need to be over there now... [hastily retreats to the far side of the room]"

That's how it often goes. Granted, most of the people I encounter tend to be a bit more polite with their disdain, but even among the very politically even-handed, the surprise still shows through. Tell almost anyone that you teach a course in "comicbook literature" and their eyes glaze over, that half-smile wanders across their face, and soon they're desperately fumbling for something oh-so-constructive to say, like "Really? They consider that literature?" or "I think I have an old copy of *Little Lulu* somewhere, is it worth a lot?" or "How do you fill a whole semester with funny books?" or even "I didn't know they still *made* those things!"

Actually, that kind of social encounter reminds me of a story Stan Lee often recounts about his early days in the comicbook biz (whether it's true or not is anyone's guess, of course - many of Stan's so-called "memories" are now largely composed of apocrypha, bless his halcyon heart). When asked what he did for a living, Stan might get as far as writer before the wave of stigma-induced disdain swept his way, but say "comicbook writer" and they might be prepared to tar and feather the fellow before he managed to get out of the building. Sad but often true, and it doesn't matter whether it really happened to Stan or not; the attitude remains.

Still the standard relationship between academia and comics?

I've been teaching a course in comicbook literature for several years now, supported by a very receptive and forward-thinking English department and generally left to my own devices by an administration that evidently understands the value of hiring people who know their subject matter and letting them get on with their work. To be honest, I'm surprised that I've never received one phone call or letter from anyone expressing any doubts about the course or questioning its academic merits. I've almost hungered for just such a confrontation, but perhaps these more enlightened times have robbed me of that conflict; so much the better.

Still, on a one-to-one basis, I often find that people in a social setting are at a loss when I tell them what the course involves. Most of them, I'm quite sure, feel that this is some frivolous "pop culture" course being offered merely to fill a slot, but let them think what they will. Even the students have their own preconceptions - as one department colleague has informed me, I enjoy a certain reputation as the one who teaches the "fun" course. After all, when poring through the course catalogue for something easy to take, what student wouldn't leap at the chance to sign up for a class in comicbooks? Surely this will be a joy ride compared to Comparative Biology or Post-Colonial Literature?

Well, I try to make sure that it *is* fun but that it requires some thinking and no small amount of work as well. I've even been gratified to learn at the end of the semester that some students - who never even *thought* of comic books before, let alone read one - were leaving with an enhanced appreciation for the artform and perhaps even a title or two in mind to track down at a local comic shop.

The point of it all is to help spread the word. Now that media studies have grown as a discipline in American universities, with courses appearing based on everything from comics (not just me) to *Doctor Who* (not kidding, an entire semester analyzing the socio-political and cultural ramifications of our favorite Time Lord's wanderings), this is the best time to prepare for the day when comics are properly installed in the litany as just another mode of expression for authors seeking to comment on humanity in all its glory.

As I've noted once before in this column, academia and comics are starting to find ways to co-operate in other disciplines far removed from stodgy old literature departments as well. In several multimedia courses I've been privileged to take at the University of Baltimore, for example, Dr. Stuart Moulthrop makes use of texts like Scott McCloud's **Understanding Comics** and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' **Watchmen** to instruct students about hypertextual narrative and the interrelationships between the verbal and the visual from both a graphic design and information architecture standpoint.

"Wow, that's heady stuff! And I thought these were just funny books!"

Not any more, bub. And hey, if comics can gain the respect of the academic intelligentsia, there's no telling how far they may go. Why, one day, we may see dramatic productions of **The Dark Knight Returns** on a double bill with **King Lear**, or perhaps a literary round table discussion on gender politics in Robert Crumb strips...

... but leave the medium-sized Wolverine T-shirts at home please.

*Arnold is co-author and designer of **Howe's Transcendental Toybox**, the first-ever comprehensive guide to Doctor Who collectibles (www.tardis.tv). He is Editor of **The Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide**. He is also Senior Editor of **Cinescape** (www.cinescape.com). Arnold can't wait to teach his comic course again in 2003. He can be pestered at the14thdoctor@yahoo.com.*

THE INTERNET KILLED THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY 3

Ande Morgensen on why comics need to die before they can live again!...

MARVEL Comics was doing something right. DotComics - the idea of putting some of their top ranked books up online prior to release - might smack of madness, but the company is playing on the mentality that you actually want to hold a comic in your hands rather than read it on screen. There are drawbacks to this idea.

The DotComics idea may or may not have much longevity, but it is to be regarded as a positive step forward in US comics. However, some believe the future of the industry in the western world lies with something quite old and already regarded as the best platform for showing comics… paper.

Following on from the editor's second editorial in the last issue of **Borderline**, comics in the USA need to be cheap and affordable and, more than anything else, ephemeral. Comics need to remain important to the individual, but must still be seen as disposable value-for-money trinkets by the masses: the way comics are treated in most countries around the world.

Comics need to lose their nerdy image. The only way they can do that is by returning to the ghettos and forgetting about changing the ingrained opinions of anti-comics snobs. US comics have been threatening to become a cottage industry again ever since the mini economic boom the industry had in the early 1990s. Now that industry needs to ditch the corporate and get back down to the nitty gritty, while utilising everything it has ever learnt – from both successes and failures.

Comicbooks is a niche market that has failed, on a regular basis, to be able to exploit itself. When it tries it fails miserably, because either its timing stinks or it has completely misread the market.

There is arguably little wrong with the content coming from countries such as the USA and the UK. However, the mainstream press is seeing all the stuff that we, as serious comics readers, don't really want them to see. It doesn't matter how "hard" Joe and Bill have made Marvel, Captain America is still Captain America and the heroes all put costumes on and have flamboyant names and powers. How many people reading this article will sit and discuss comicbooks with a non-fan? Would you sit in the bars or cafes and talk about the latest issue of the **Fantastic Four**? No, because you won't even sit and talk about comics - the medium - as an important cultural phenomenon. Do you think people have this trouble in Norway or France or Brazil or Japan? In fact, most of the rest of the world would have no problem discussing comics *anywhere* - except for the US and UK, which both have this conceited view that they know best, that comics are for kids and geeks, and that the pillorying of something the Americans claim they *invented* is therefore the norm.

For comics to thrive again in the two countries that want them to thrive the most yet where they thrive least, there has to be a concerted effort by the publishers to try and change the public's perception of the medium. Arguably, American comics became too slick and had the PR gurus and smart dressed company men at the wrong time. These people are needed now, they weren't when comics were making exceptional amounts of profit. It doesn't matter how many TV shows Joe Quesada goes on saying how cool Marvel is now, he still looks like one of the geeks the rest of the country thinks he's aiming his sales pitch at. How much interest does the rest of the world have in listening to a fat bloke talk about how cool the Hulk is now? None. They're interested in seeing a multi-million dollar special effects fest with a CGI Hulk for a couple of hours. They don't want to read a slow and almost stupefying story that takes place over half a year.

Comics need to die. Someone needs to come along and say, "This horse is dead, stop flogging it!"

Then comics can make a comeback. Except when they do, publishers drop the word "comics" and go for something more… hip and trendy. If they intend to continue with pamphlets, then they aim these 24 page "samplers" at the young and make them cheap. They hook the kids, then they nurture them, and then they needn't do much more than supply them. For the older readers, publishers start to bring out cheaper graphic novels. Publishers can still do the limited edition, signed and numbered hardback stuff. In fact the major US comics publishers should look at the book trade - there are lessons to be learned. As for what else I'd do with the phoenix rising from comics' ashes, that'll have to wait until next month, when I'll tell you how being very brave might be the saviour of this industry.

Next issue - The Internet killed the Entertainment Industry – part last: The future is brighter than you think!

The Hulk movie promo. The film probably won't affect sales of the comic as happened when *Batman* was released!

CONTINENTAL MILESTONES

Mike Kidson switches from his usual historical preoccupations to take a look at a few classic series from the European mainstream. We still haven't thought of a better title...

SOMEWHERE UNDER THE RADAR

ONE misrepresentation often encountered in English language writing about European comics is the notion that Europe is, compared with the USA and Britain, some kind of Land of Milk and Honey. A wonderland where comics have for decades been collected in albums that are constantly kept in print, and where comics are a respectable medium for adults to read. To some extent that comparison is certainly true, but perhaps more with respect to the post-1960 development of adult Bandes Dessinées in France (and to its precursors, such as Blake et Mortimer, as discussed here last month) than to the totality of European production. Beneath the prominent veneer of album publication and critical acclaim lies a level of comics production familiar to all Anglophone readers – mass-produced weekly or monthly pamphlets sold in newsagents, bought and discarded by young readers and now considerably eroded from what it was even a decade ago. So I'm going to bend my brief a bit – such periodical comics are surely definitively mainstream, but whether "classic" as a label denotes durability and critical acclaim or large scale popularity is a matter for debate – and take a look at a series which was highly popular in several European countries during the 1980s but has never, to my knowledge, been written about in articles or listed in reference works.

THE STRANGE CAREER OF *PATTY'S WORLD*

Patty's World made its first appearance circa 1972, lushly drawn by Spanish artist Purita Campos as one of numerous strip series in the UK girls' weekly Princess Tina. It proved popular enough to be transferred over to the part magazine/part comic Pink which replaced Princess Tina in March 1973. It continued there on an occasional basis until Pink was cancelled in 1981 and may have made a few subsequent appearances in Mates, which in turn was cancelled in 1982. There it came to an end. No-one much in Britain had ever paid particular attention to it, and by 1982 the remaining UK girls' weeklies were largely shifting from drawn comic strips to photo-stories, leaving *Patty's World* with nowhere to go.

Nowhere, that is, except continental Europe. As its British run drew to an end, UK publisher IPC made the series available via the London firm Syndication International Ltd. A thriving trade in syndication of children's comics series across Europe had been in place for decades, and *Patty's World* was taken up by publishers in at least four countries. In The Netherlands it had already been appearing as one of the many British strips in the popular Dutch weekly Tina, where it had been renamed *Peggy*. In Greece the name *Patty* was retained as title. In Germany Bastei Verlag launched it in its own title as Biggi, and in Spain Editorial Bruguera followed suit, renaming it Esther y su mondo. Since Editorial Bruguera was also active in Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela and Argentina, it's possible that the series also surfaced in those countries. If anyone reading this knows, I'd love to hear about it – and also about any appearances it may have made in yet more countries!

"PERO ."
¡BAH! ¡ES UNA CINTA VÍRGEN, NADA MÁS!
¡LA CULPA ES TUYA,ESTÚPIDO! ¡LA HAS PUESTO CON EL BOTÓN EN"GRABAR" EN VEZ DEL DE"ESCUCHAR"! ¡HAS BORRADO LA CINTA!
¡GRACIAS A DIOS!
429

Resigned to humiliation - Patty in Spain as Esther, circa 1976

The German and Spanish versions were enormously successful, spawning digest editions, spin-off albums and reprint collections. In Germany, the supply of British originals ran out after 83 issues; rather than cancel a successful magazine Bastei commissioned German writers (including Peter Mennigen) and various artists (including Juliana Büch) to produce further stories, and Biggi continued for another 270 weekly issues. Although utterly obscure in the country where it began, the local editions of *Patty's World* are still fondly remembered in both Germany and Spain. Constant and brisk trade in back issues can be found on eBay at all times.

A NEW KIND OF HEROINE

So why was this very minor British series a big success in at least two European countries? I wouldn't presume to make any positive pronouncements about what girls appreciate in a girls' comic! What I can do, though, is take a look at how *Patty's World* differed in certain key respects from the majority of the British girls' series.

Patty's World tells of the adventures, trials and tribulations of young Patty Lucas, her family and her friends, as narrated by Patty herself. This involves a mixture of third person narrative - the standard mode, in which the reader watches events unfolding in a sequence of panels - and

WE MET PAUL'S MOTHER OUTSIDE THE WARD...
BUT WHEN I LOOKED WELL OKAY I'M SORT, BUT THEY WERE ALL SO POSH AND SOCIETY AN' WHEN JOHNNY AND ME DIDN'T BELONG
OH PATTY I'M ETERNALLY GRATEFUL FOR WHAT YOU AND YOUR FRIEND DID THERE ARE SOME RELATIVES W TH PAUL NOW, BUT YOU CAN GO N

A young Patty acknowledges the class system, Princess Tina 1973

first person narrative in which Patty directly addresses the reader via borderless vignettes and text captions. It's a powerful and affecting mode of storytelling, one which had been around since at least 1900 (Edith Nesbit's classic children's novel The Story of the Treasure Seekers being an early example) and which was perhaps better suited to the visual medium of comics than to prose - but it had rarely been employed in post-war British comics. The most prominent earlier example was *The Happy Days*, a very popular series devised by Jenny Butterworth for Princess in 1960; in fact, *Patty's World* appears to have been an updated replacement for *The Happy Days*. But it was far more than just an update.

The Happy Days reflected both the kind of girls' comic and the social view of the family that prevailed in 1960; narrator Sue Day was cheerful, resourceful and confident, and the Day family was a contented lower middle class unit with a working dad and a housekeeping mother, happily overcoming all social or domestic disturbances. The series lived up to its title – every day was happy, every cloud had a silver lining.

A little over a decade later *Patty's World* was very different. Daughter of a careworn widow whose policeman second husband was respected by her children but never quite loved, Patty Lucas was something really new in comics - a heroine who suffered from a deep-rooted lack of self esteem which she masked by helping others, often at her own expense. Her doubts, fears, small triumphs and deeply felt defeats gave an otherwise fairly standard family soap opera a sharp edge of psychological resonance. Held together by Patty's direct, personal narrative, it was as though the sometimes madcap, sometimes tear-jerking exploits of the Lucas family and friends reflected the mood swings of an insecure teenage girl.

Peggy bij de krant
M'N VADER, M'N ECHTE VADER BEDOEL IK, WERKTE BIJ EEN KRANT EN HET ZIT ERIN DAT IK IN Z'N VOETSTAP PEN TREED
ZE VROEGEN EEN MEISJE VOOR DE ZATERDAG BIJ HET OOSTELIJK NIEUWS BLAD
OOSTELIJK NIEUWSBLAD
DIT IS HET PLUS HIER BLEEF MIJN VADER ZIJN DAGEN
HET ARCHIEF ZIT OP DE DERTIENDE ETAGE, MEISJE, VANDAAR KUN JE DE HELE WERELD BEKIJKEN
DAT ZEI POP OOK ALTIJD

Peggy recalls her father's death, in Tina circa 1977

SPEECH AND GROWTH PATTERNS

The down beat effect of that was a genuine innovation, but it wasn't all that was new about *Patty's World*. For one thing Patty and her peers "spoke" in slang rather than standard English – and not the embarrassingly "hip" teen talk fabricated in American comics by middle-aged men, but authentic contemporary slang with a working class inflection. As John Wagner remarks elsewhere this issue, the IPC girls' comics began to change around 1970; and Patty Lucas was not just an introspective heroine but a working class one who knew that she did not belong to the jolly middle-class world traditional in the girls' titles. The German translators in particular carefully replaced British slang with authentic German speech patterns - perhaps this was seen as an important part of the series' appeal?

Another highly unusual feature was that the heroine perceptibly grew up during the run of the series. In the earliest Princess Tina stories (not reprinted in Europe), Patty was a small girl more interested in playing games than in boys. When the series transferred to Pink she aged a couple of years, becoming hopelessly and inarticulately in love with her childhood chum Johnny and working her way through a massive array of boutique clothing which, if nothing else, emphasised that the series wasn't *totally* realistic! When Bastei Verlag ran out of original stories to reprint, their new writers revamped Biggi. Patty/Biggi and her best friend Sharon/Jess aged by another couple of years, they were transferred from England to California and the series switched over to romantic comedies which largely abandoned the first person narrative but retained the heroine's character as an older, slightly unsure teenager. It's that uncertainty which remains perhaps the series' principal charm and attraction.

It isn't really surprising that such a strikingly innovative and emotional series went unnoticed in England. It was launched at a time when the girls' weeklies were being transformed into teen magazines where comic strips were gradually phased out in favour of photo-strips and features about fashions and pop stars – and Pink, the primary venue for *Patty's World*, was the main precursor of that trend. Oddly, though, the same formula made it a hit in Germany and in Spain (in The Netherlands the traditional drawn comics for girls continued to thrive). Perhaps the crucial difference was that the continental editions collected two or three of the British weekly episodes into each issue, establishing longer narrative spans that were more attractive to readers, while the British comics slowly strangled on their traditional format of packing several continued serials into each issue.

Whatever the reasons, the long term success of translated editions and the current market for back issues certainly demonstrates that, for many readers if not for fans of comics, this series neglected in its country of origin became a continental classic.

CONAN RIDES AGAIN

HE was one of the most popular pulp characters of the 1930s. His adventures have been reprinted in book form dozens of times. He became a major success for Marvel Comics in the 1970s. In the 1980s he was immortalised on film by Arnold Schwarzenegger. And in the 1990s he appeared in his own TV series. Now Conan the Barbarian is returning to comics in a new ongoing series from Dark Horse.

***Borderline**'s resident barbarian marauder Mike Sivier takes this opportunity to have a look at the past career of the world's favourite sword and sorcery hero - and consults the oracles about his future.*

PART ONE: THE CREATOR AND HIS CREATION

"Barbarism is the natural state of mankind. Civilisation is unnatural. It is a whim of circumstance. And barbarism must always ultimately prevail."
Robert E. Howard

ROBERT ERVIN HOWARD (1906-1936) was born in Peaster, Texas, and spent most of his life in the town of Cross Plains. After his school years, he took a few courses at Brownwood College and then became a freelance writer.

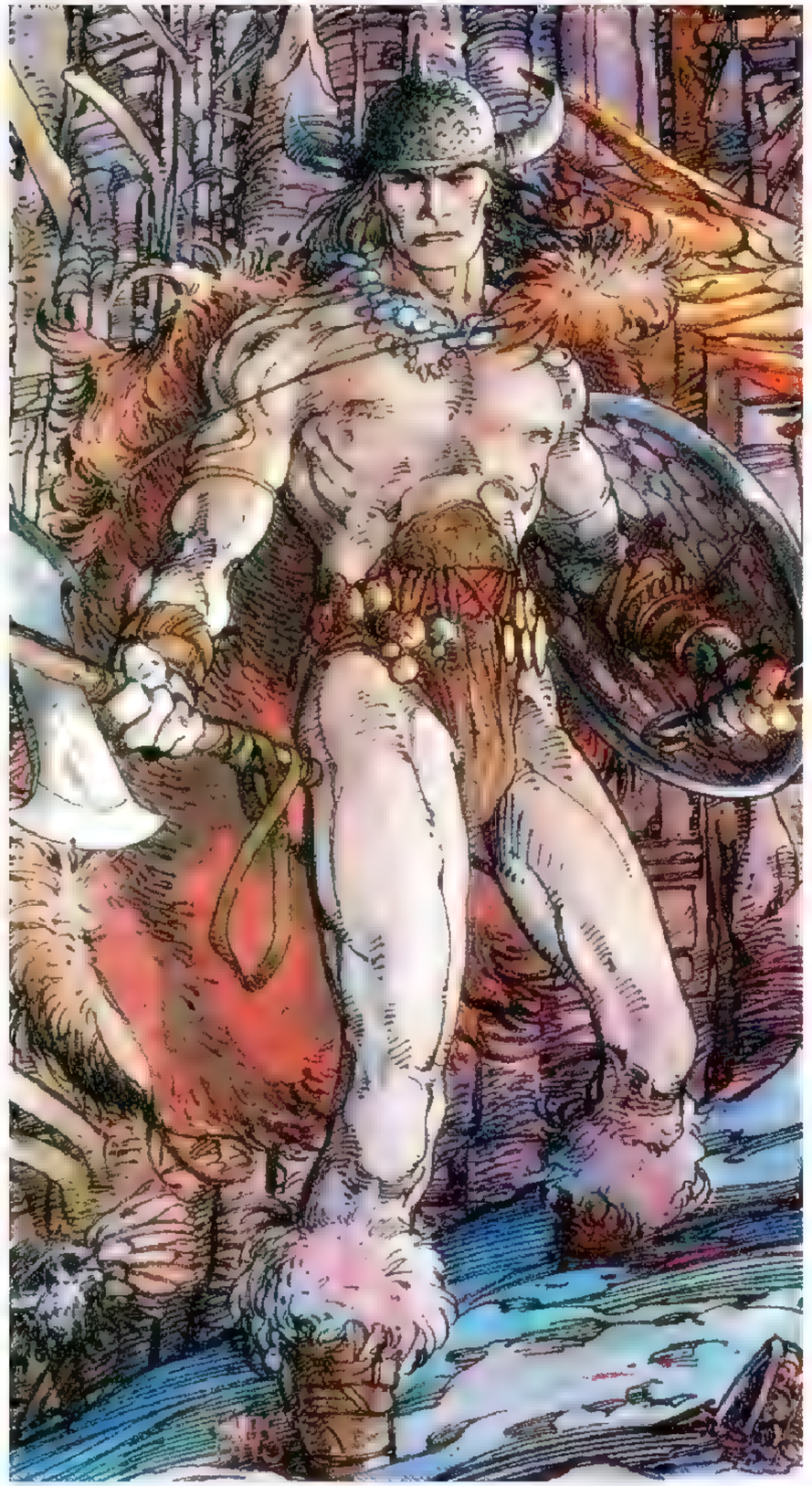
As a boy, Howard's intelligence made him a misfit - especially in Texas. He suffered the bullying that many brilliant but weak boys suffer and, partly as a result, became a sport and exercise fanatic and, eventually, an accomplished boxer and horseman. When he reached adulthood he was 6ft tall and weighed more than 200lbs (that's 14st 4lbs if you're British) - most of which was muscle.

But his personality was introverted and moody, given to emotional extremes and violent likes and dislikes. For several years before his death, he talked of suicide, and when - aged 30 - he learned that his mother was on the point of death, he ended his promising career by shooting himself dead.

In the previous decade, between 1927 and 1936, Howard had produced a wealth of pulp fiction, running the gamut from sport, detective, Western, historical, oriental-adventure, weird and ghost stories to poetry and, of course, fantasy. He was influenced by Edgar Rice Burroughs, Robert W. Chambers, Harold Lamb, Talbot Mundy, Jack London, and H.P. Lovecraft, with whom he was a pen pal.

In his late 20s, Howard earned more money than any other man in Cross Plains, including the town banker - even though magazine rates were low and payment often late. He was a natural storyteller, with an instinctive ability to write gripping action thrillers. His heroes were all men of mighty muscles, burning passion and great will, who generally hacked their way out of trouble, rather than thinking through their dilemmas. Howard put his reasons for writing such characters on the record before he died: "They're simpler. You get them in a jam, and no-one expects you to rack your brains inventing clever ways for them to extricate themselves. They are too stupid to do anything but cut, shoot, or slug themselves into the clear."

By far Howard's most popular character was Conan the Barbarian. His stories were set in the Hyborian Age, a period of



Illustrations by Barry Windsor-Smith, Ken Barr, Howard Chaykin, John Buscema, Alfredo Alcala, Frank Frazetta

history supposedly about 12,000 years ago, between the sinking of Atlantis and the beginning of recorded history. Conan was a gigantic barbarian adventurer who brawled, boozed and battled his way through half the prehistoric world, eventually rising to the throne of a mighty kingdom.

Howard began more than 24 Conan stories, 18 of which were published during his lifetime. The first of these was *The Phoenix on the Sword*, published in **Weird Tales** in December 1932. It was an immediate sensation, creating a legion of fans who clamoured for more.

Howard's explanation of how he came to write about Conan is this: "While I don't go so far as to believe that stories are inspired by actually existing spirits or powers - though I am rather opposed to flatly denying anything - I have sometimes wondered if it were possible that unrecognised forces of the past or present - or even the future - work through the thought and actions of living men. This occurred to me when I was writing the first stories of the Conan series especially. I knew that for months I had been absolutely barren of

ideas, completely unable to work up anything sellable. Then the man Conan seemed to grow up in my mind without much labour on my part and immediately a stream of stories flowed off my pen - or rather off my typewriter - almost without effort on my part.

"I did not seem to be creating, but rather relating events that had occurred. Episode crowded on episode so fast that I could scarcely keep up with them. For weeks I did nothing but write of the adventures of Conan. The character took complete possession of my mind and crowded out everything else in the way of story-writing.

"When I deliberately tried to write something else, I couldn't do it. I do not attempt to explain this by esoteric or occult means, but the facts remain. I still write of Conan more powerfully and with more understanding than of any of my other characters.

"But," he said, "the time will probably come when I will suddenly find myself unable to write convincingly of him at all. This has happened in the past with nearly all my rather numerous characters; suddenly I find myself out of contact with the conception, as if the man himself had been standing at my shoulder directing my efforts, and had suddenly turned and gone away, leaving me to search for another character."

On another occasion, he said: "It may sound fantastic to link the term 'realism' to Conan; but as a matter of fact - his supernatural adventures aside - he is the most realistic character I have ever evolved. He is simply a combination of a number of men I have known, and I think that's why he seemed to step full-grown into my consciousness when I wrote the first yarn of the series. Some mechanism in my sub-consciousness took the dominant characteristics of various prizefighters, gunmen, bootleggers, oil field bullies, gamblers and honest workmen I had come in contact with, and combining them all, produced the amalgamation I call Conan the Cimmerian."

After Howard's death, a large number of unpublished story manuscripts were found in collections of his papers. These included eight Conan stories - some complete, others in the form of unfinished manuscripts, outlines, or fragments.

They were prepared for publication by L. Sprague de Camp (to whom this article owes much), who collaborated with Lin Carter and Bjorn Nyberg to write new Conan stories, filling gaps in the saga. These were published by Lancer Books in America as a chronological retelling of the Conan saga. The series began publication in 1967 - in time to catch the fantasy wave created by Tolkien's **Lord of the Rings** and turn it into a tsunami.

After all the Howard stories had been reprinted, together with the new material by de Camp, Carter and Nyberg, the book series continued and thrived throughout the 1970s and 80s, with original stories by new authors.

But by the 1970s, books were no longer the only outlet for Conan fiction...

PART TWO: ENTER THE COMICS

MARVEL Comics, the American superhero giant, had been blessed with the scripting skills of Roy

Thomas since about 1966. Thomas's name had graced the credit boxes of some of the company's finest comics during that time.

In 1970, Thomas wrote the first issue of **Conan the Barbarian**, a new comicbook - and a departure in style for Marvel. Conan's adventures were not set in the superhero Marvel Universe - and no attempt was made in the pages of his comic to tie him into it. Its success arguably paved the way for a wave of new, non-superhero titles, many of which were to become classics in their own right. These included such greats as **Master of Kung Fu** by Doug Moench and Paul Gulacy (recently revived as a Marvel MAX title) and **Tomb of Dracula** by Marv Wolfman and Gene Colan.

But in 1970 the new title hit the stand with very little fanfare (and allegedly with very little faith placed in it by Marvel publisher Martin Goodman). The only mention of it on Marvel's *Bullpen Bulletins* page was: "**Conan the Barbarian** debuts this month. Miss it at your own risk". Not the most enthusiastic of beginnings for what would become a panelological phenomenon.

Conan had two important factors working in its favour. The first was its scripter - and the second was the interpretation of his scripts by a British artist called, at the time, simply Barry Smith. Smith (some of whose covers for the Marvel reprint book **Conan Saga** appear on these pages) had a very shaky track record in American comics. He had worked infrequently on titles including **Daredevil**, **The Avengers** and **The X-Men**, but had hardly set the world on fire. His interesting style of layout art was swamped by a finished art style resembling a poor man's Jack Kirby.

However, **Conan** was a turning point for Smith. With this first issue, it became apparent that he was honing his own style. It was still a long way from the Pre-Raphaelite-style works of art that would later become synonymous with his name - but it was exciting. And that's what was communicated to the fans. And *that's* why **Conan the Barbarian** became a hit.

The series had its critics - especially at the start. But Thomas was working hard on his series. He was determined to adapt the original Conan stories, by Howard and others, in order, but he also wanted to fill in the gaps in Conan's life story. So the early issues of **Conan the Barbarian** fleshed out the character and his world - and added qualities to Conan himself that had been muted in the print versions of his adventures. The primitive brutishness remained, but he was also a thinking being; there was a feeling of sensitivity about him which led the reader to understand how he could grow world-weary while barely out of his teens.

This subtle extra dimension allowed readers to see Conan not just as a product of his age, but also as a mirror for modern times. Thomas's Conan is very much like modern people. Like all of us, he

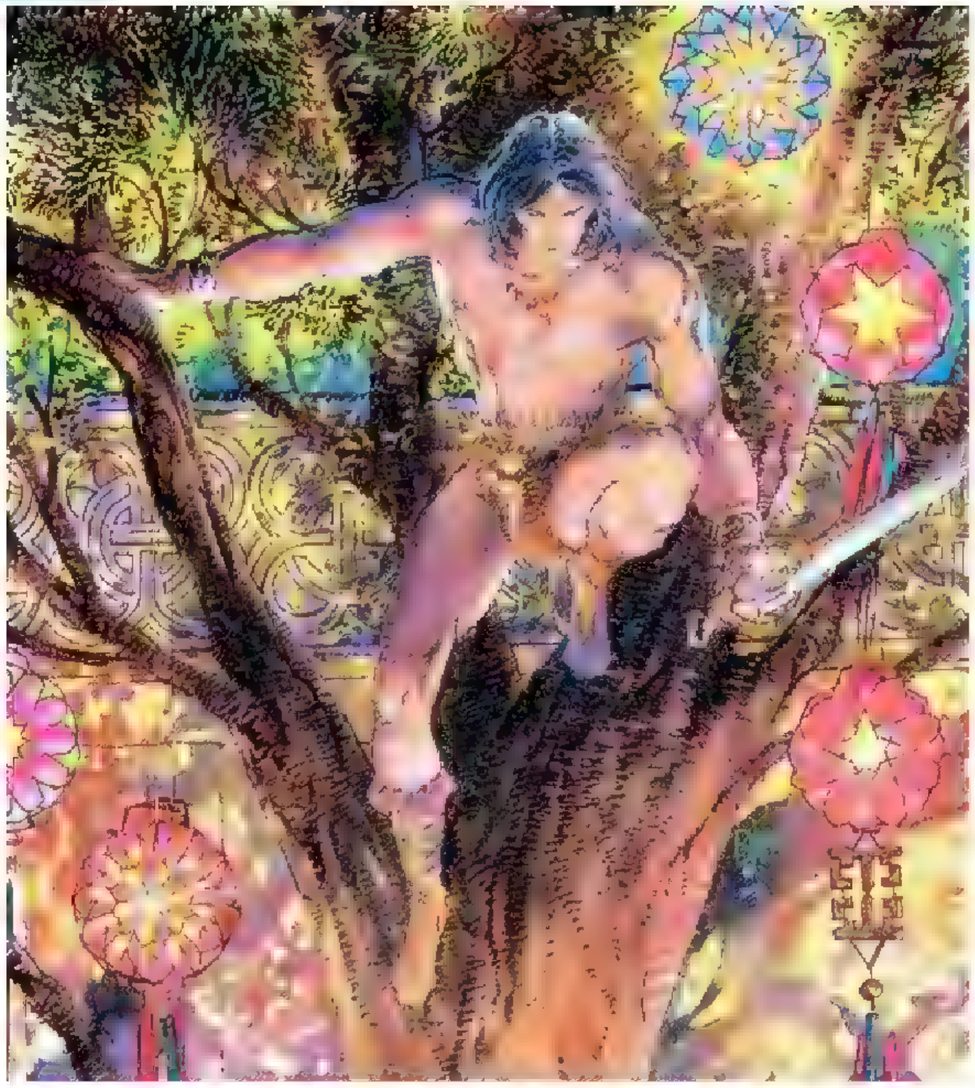
does what he must to survive, using the tools available to him to do it. This approach doesn't always take him in the direction he originally wants to go - like us. We do what we must, and sometimes convince ourselves it's what we were born to do anyway - but at other times people can be gripped with melancholy which prompts us to be more truthful about ourselves, like Conan.

Barry Smith quit **Conan the Barbarian** with its 24th issue, having created a vision of the Hyborian Age which was every bit the equal to that shown in the paintings of Frank Frazetta, the Lancer book jacket illustrator and himself a former comics artist. **Conan** had become one of the most visually distinctive comics in the Marvel stable. Who now could step into the gap and continue that success.

Thomas - and Marvel - struck the motherlode when they asked the late, great, John Buscema to take on the challenge. Buscema had been working in comics for several decades by this time (see our obituary in a previous issue of **Borderline**), and had been at Marvel since the mid-1960s. He had collaborated with Thomas on many issues of **The Avengers**.

But his arrival meant a radical change in art styles. Buscema was well-established as an action artist, and his style on **Conan** reflected a more gritty, brutish perspective. His Conan developed physically - in line with Thomas' progression of his career - to become a powerful man, taller and more muscular than almost everyone around him, and charged with kinetic energy. He dominated every scene in which he appeared. As a result, Conan's popularity rose yet again - and this was the situation when Marvel launched a new black-and-white, magazine-size title, **The Savage Sword of Conan**.

The company was trying to penetrate a more adult market, and



Conan seemed a ready-made vehicle with which to do so. The **Savage Sword** stories would be more adult in tone, and unrestricted by the Comics Code - making it possible to offer a more faithful adaptation of the works of the original Conan scribes.

Savage Sword was another major success for the company, and continued to be published throughout the 1970s, 80s, and into the 1990s. The magazine format also allowed for the appearance of back-up strips, making it possible for Marvel to adapt more of Howard's pulp characters into comicbook series.

Other titles followed, including the short-lived **King Conan/ Conan the King** in the early 1980s, and the reprint book **Conan Saga**, which repackaged the entire Barry Smith run from the early Conan comic before going on to represent the best of the rest.

But even the savage barbarian could not escape the recession that hit American comics in the 1990s. His titles were cancelled and eventually fans were asked to be satisfied with mini-series written by lesser creators than Thomas and drawn by artists other than Buscema.

Thomas had left the series after more than 20 years, and Buscema had likewise moved on. The Golden Age of Marvel's Conan was over, and Conan Properties, the group which owned the rights to Howard's character, began to think of licensing the character to other comicbook companies...

PART THREE: INTO THE FUTURE

IN late 2002 Dark Horse Comics has announced a new publishing programme featuring the legendary adventures of **Conan the Barbarian**. The new monthly ongoing series will include all-new stories based on the classic Robert E. Howard character, and also incorporate adaptations of his original Conan tales.

First introduced as "Conan the Cimmerian" in the 1930s, Robert E. Howard's character soon attracted an enormous following the world over. Over the past 70 years, the barbarian hero has been brought to life in books, comics, television, and film. Recently rumoured to be in the works is a new Conan feature film.

"I am very honored and excited to bring this classic character back to the comics world," commented Dark Horse President Mike Richardson. "We will be working closely with Fredrik Malmberg of Conan Properties to ensure the highest quality stories and art to do this legendary character justice."

"Conan has been a major comics franchise for many years," Fredrik Malmberg remarked. "Dark Horse was our number one choice when we looked for a new licensee and we are extremely pleased with the creative approach they are planning."

The Dark Horse Conan series is scheduled to launch in mid-2003.

TWO SHRUNKEN HEADS ARE BETTER THAN ONE?

***Borderline**'s Inquisitor Jay Eales has some theses to nail to your door... courtesy of **Rex Mundi**'s Arvid Nelson and Eric J.*

BACK in March, in this year of Our Lord Two Thousand and Two, **Borderline**'s intrepid interrogator Jay Eales conducted an interview with Arvid Nelson and Eric J, known heretics of this parish, operating under the nom-de-guerre of Shrunken Heads Studios, prior to the release of their pamphlet **Rex Mundi** [*as recounted in **Borderline** #8*]. At the conclusion of the interview, the pair were released back into the wild in order that they may be given enough rope to hang themselves, or to determine if their souls might yet be saved.

It is my solemn duty to report that far from repenting their sins, aided and abetted by arch-deviants calling themselves Image (and we all know what the good book says about worshipping false images, don't we, pilgrims?), were able to distribute their message far and wide, resulting in **Rex Mundi #0** selling out in less than two weeks, necessitating the use of Master Caxton's printing press for a second edition. Such was Image's faith in the pair that they chose to give **Rex Mundi** its own launch, rather than under the insidious disguise of the **Image Introduces** banner, as our sources had previously maintained even under the duress of thumbscrews.

This success only served to further hasten Nelson and J.'s journey into darkness, ensnaring another poor soul in the form of Jeromy Cox along the way, forcing him to embellish their drawings with all manner of hues designed to draw in the unwary. Marplots, it is whispered, are already afoot to produce yet more pamphlets on a regular basis, beginning as soon as December of this year.

Borderline's network of truth seekers was able to secure an advance look at the latest tome, to be known as **Rex Mundi #1**, and found it to be just as devilishly enthralling as the previous instalment. In order that our readers may test their faith against the darkness, we reproduce the first five pages within the covers of our own blessed publication. Those of a nervous disposition should enlist the aid of their local priest to read it to them, while those whose faith remains strong should endeavour to procure a copy of the pamphlet when it ships to comics emporiums in the week commencing December 11th, whereupon they can demonstrate the strength of their conviction among their friends during prayer.

Be vigilant!

All artwork on both pages comes from the forthcoming Rex Mundi #1 from Image Comics

IN SEARCH OF... STEVE DITKO

David McLintock's searching the Internet for really obscure artists these days. Whoever will it be next month - Jack Kirby?

THERE are numerous inevitables in life. It always rains when you're waiting for the last bus, especially if it's late or doesn't turn up; my team will be out of Europe by Christmas; and, sooner or later, I'd get round to doing my stuff with Mr. Ditko as the subject. The first two happened so the third had to follow - especially now that Fantagraphics are working with Blake Bell (maitre'd of the doyen of Ditko sites "Ditko Looked Up") to produce *the* definitive book on the great man of mystery. Now, it's a theory that marketing science is based on the black arts. I've studied the stuff but never believed it to be anything other than bollocks, until last week when I went through to Edinburgh (spit!) to meet the other anonymous posters to a site I frequent (*www.firstfoot.com*). Lo and behold, I swear we all looked like each other, were all the same age and with the same beer gut. So I'm willing to bet that Mr. Bell is in his mid-forties, balding, wears specs, likes a beer and a good laugh *[How much d'you bet? - Production Ed.]*. Unless of course, he is so into Ditko that he regularly dips into *www.aynrand.com* to immerse himself in Ditko's obsession with objectivism. Then he could look like anything… but he would be wearing a suit.

Now I've freaked everyone out with the site that "debunks Scottishness", you'll be wanting to go to Bell's site *www.ditko.comics.org/* to get a large advance copy of his book. This truly is a superb example of a fan site, one which just keeps getting better and better. An impressive encyclopaedic source of information on Ditko, by the time you've ploughed through this you'd be forgiven for wondering why Ditko is still regarded as an enigma. There's so much to enjoy, but I'll just mention a few interesting snippets. We find that Ditko's first published work was for **Fantastic Fears** #5, in 1953 when I were but a gleam in me ole dad's eye. Charlton welcomed him in 1954 (no, missus, the comics company, not the football team) and Ditko was delighted to find little editorial interference, which is undoubtedly why he kept returning. But even then Steve was proving, eh, unusual. Bell writes "Ditko left New York in 1954, giving up comics and having only 3 pages published in 1955. An explanation as to why has never been provided." But by flirting between Charlton and Atlas (very soon to be Marvel Comics), Ditko produced 701 pages of artwork in 1963. That's nearly two a day for the numerically challenged out there.

Another telling quote - "those who knew Ditko at the time knew of him as a socio-political beast". The old Green Goblin identity chestnut gets a good going over for the events of 1966 which saw Ditko walk out on Marvel. Apparently Ditko wanted the Goblin to be a nobody as "99 of 100 real criminals are nobodies". This theme is expanded by following the links to an article published in The Los Angeles Times. The L.A. piece begins by telling us that Ditko was the son of European immigrants, and has a brother called Patrick. As a child he was a fan of Batman and The Spirit. A lifelong bachelor (wonder what the UK's *Sun* newspaper would make of that ?) he has no children. It quotes Marv Wolfman on Ditko, "he was more than willing to discuss Spider-Man… he always felt Spidey should never be older than 16 because that was the last year a kid could totally screw up" (he's not met my daughter, obviously). We learn that Ditko's acquaintances consider him "polite, friendly and soft-spoken". By the time Roy Thomas joined Marvel in 1965 Ditko and Stan Lee were "speaking through intermediaries… they got to arguing over plot lines." But perhaps the most telling quote is from Lee: "I really don't know why he left to this day, and he's never told me", to which Ditko replies, "I know why I left Marvel but no one else in the universe knew or knows why. It may be of mild interest to realise that Stan Lee chose not to know, to hear why I left."

In all honesty one could write this whole piece based on the "Ditko Looked Up" site, but natural curiosity (never mind accusations of total plagiarism) takes me further out there. The closest to an official Ditko site is at *www.snyder-ditko.com/* which proves to be more

NO SOONER DOES HIS BEWITCHED AMULET FADE INTO NOTHINGNESS, THAN DR. STRANGE BEHOLDS ... FOR THE FIRST TIME ... THE DAZZLING, DESCRIPTION-DEFYING DIMENSION OF ... ETERNITY!
I HAVE FINALLY REACHED MY GOAL! BUT WHAT INCONCEIVABLE WONDER AWAITS ME NOW?

Above: an Atlas mystery story reprinted in Tales To Astonish #46 and the weird world of Dr Strange, far right.

Above: Ditko inking Eric Stanton? Right 1997 Fantagraphics stuff, some of Ditko's recent work.

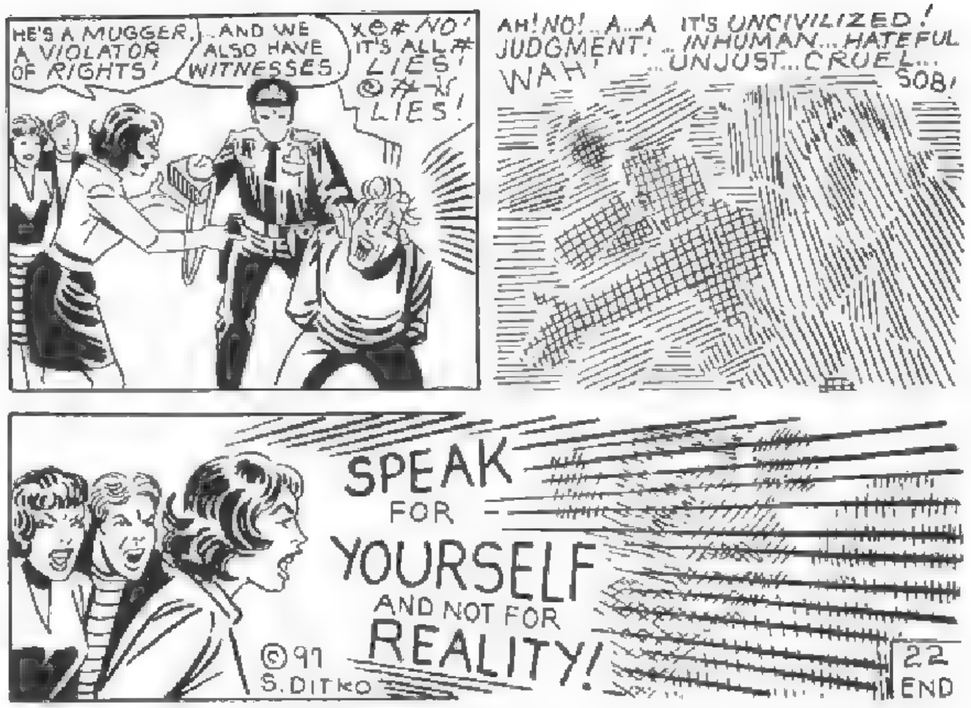
of a commercial site - Snyder publishes Steve these days - than one that gets down and dirty. There may be more to be found in the links to Snyder's "The Comics" magazine but that would have to be paid for and I'm blessed with short arms and an incredibly deep sporran, so I'll pass.

Being never one to boost the opposition, the most comprehensive articles yet to be committed to print on our hero appeared in *Wizard* #124, which may be found archived at *www.wizardworld.com/* if you can get past their search engine's limitations. It'll give you a headache but will also save you parting with the readies for the mag itself, assuming you can find one in the back issue bins. Excellent stuff. An article from *Amazing Heroes* #155, 1988 is at *http://www.comicsfun.com/static.htm* and may be "copied and distributed if left unchanged and intact", so go read it for yourself. Our chums at the Silver Age Marvel Comics Cover Index have their usual excellent selection of covers at *www.samcoiconics.org/artists/ditko.html* , where you can drool over some sumptuous graphics. It does titillate with a link to their own dedicated Ditko site which appears to have gone belly up, as has their "complete Ditko covers site". Who knows, maybe soon it'll be back.

What Ditko himself would make of "Steve Ditko - Interesting Motherfuckers" by one Wil Forbis at *www.acidlogic.com/im_steveditko.htm* doesn't take much imagination, given him being a socio-political beast as mentioned previously. It's a weird piece that appears to slag off Ditko before acknowledging Ditko's legacy. However perhaps it's all a big piss take, given the authors view that "Ross Andru was vastly under appreciated". Quite. *[Outside, now! – Production Ed.]* Other "Interesting Motherfuckers" include Spike Milligan, Toshiro Mifune and a collection of Americans no cultured person could ever have possibly heard of. Mind you, going back to the *Wizard* article, perhaps Ditko *is* "interesting", as they described him as "a lanky man, with European features", whatever that means, and "an average elderly gentleman who… wears business suits". They must lack for excitement across the pond.

Somewhere or other most sites will touch on Ditko's political beliefs, which are based on something called "Objectivism", defined as "The way a man must think and act if he is to live a proper life. A is A, facts are facts and things are what they are. Right or wrong. Black or white. Deserving of credit or not". Now this sounds exactly like the plot of virtually everything Ditko has produced from the late '60s onward. If you really must know more of that which inspires Mr. D. in life, get it from the horse's mouth at *www.aynrand.org* , where you can learn more of the thrilling Ms. Rand and her philosophy on life. Don't worry 'bout me being ahead of you in the queue.

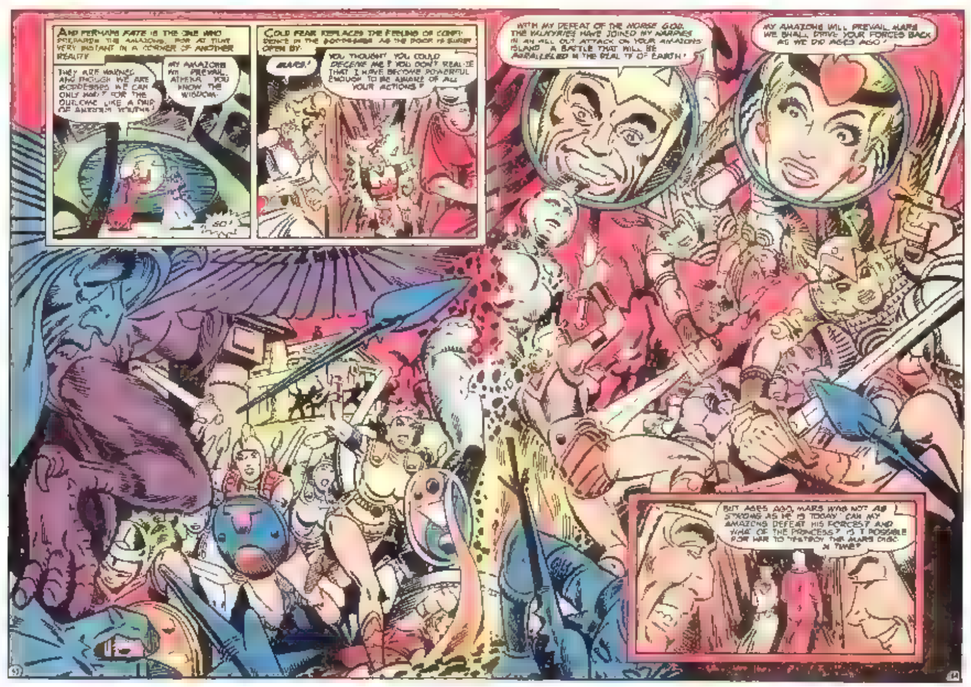
"Steve Ditko's World" on *www.geocities.com/Hollywood/7941/* has an OK biog of Steve but is interesting mainly for the picture it has of a 16 year old Ditko, probably taken just before he screwed up for the last time, and an Eric Stanton piece of



bondage art that Stanton claimed was inked by Ditko - a claim strenuously denied. "A Talk With Joe Simon" at *www.simoncomics.com/jsmag.htm* gives Simon's account of a character he created in 1953, whom he originally called Spiderman "before changing it to The Silver Spider". A sketch of the character shows him clinging to a wall just like you-know-who.

Lastly, I couldn't let you all go without giving you a chance to part with the family silver. Anthony Snyder has a few pages of Ditko original art *http://www.anthonysnyder.com/art/trades_only.html.* Page 1 of **Strange Tales** #114 is a must at $15,000, although you could get page 3 at a bargain $3,500. Mind you it's hardly the most exciting page in comics, and looks suspiciously as if a Mr. Don Heck had dangled his ink brush over it. Tony-boy can't even quote us a price for page 14 of **Amazing Spider-Man** #34. If you hear of any masked bank raids in the Glasgow area over the next few weeks, let's just say Anthony might be getting a call.

Ditko. Enigma. Yet lots more of him is known of him than he'd probably like. I wonder what the Sunday Times would pay for the "Ditko Diaries"?



An epic double page spread from DC's Wonder Woman Spectacular, 1978

JOHN CLEESE: MAN OF STEEL?

It's true: John Cleese, he of Monty Python and Basil Fawlty fame - and the current Q in the James Bond films - is to write a forthcoming Superman graphic novel. Not much is known about the project at the moment but Mike Sivier has done some investigating...

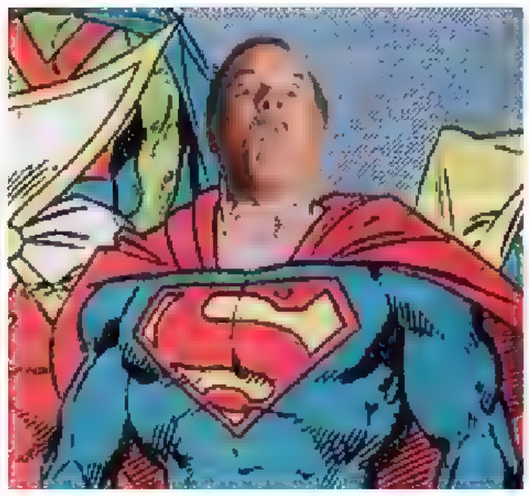
TWO kinds of comics are combining for a new graphic novel, possibly to be released in 2003. The first is the most iconic strip character in the world - Superman. The second is one of Britain's great comic actors - John Cleese.

Bizarre? Believe it. Cleese is set to co-write a 96-page Superman Elseworlds adventure for DC Comics, aided by his Personal Assistant - and a prolific Monty Python author - Kim "Howard" Johnson. It is understood a current title for the project is "True Brit". The story is believed to ask what would happen if Kal-El's rocketship crashed in England, rather than Kansas. How would British people react? And how would the tabloids deal with it?

One guarantee is that Cleese and Johnson will not be turning Superman into a Monty Python character; there won't be any fish-slapping, or lumberjack songs.

Cleese's choice to write a Superman comic could be seen as fate by anyone who enjoyed the Bicycle Repairman sketch on *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. But the genesis of the project lies in a conversation which took place between DC editor Mike Carlin and Kim "Howard" Johnson 15 years ago. Carlin suggested that, if any of the Pythons ever wanted to do something with Superman, they would be welcome to contact him. He expected the best he could get would be a Terry Gilliam cover. Johnson mentioned the offer to Cleese - and the rest is, apparently, destiny.

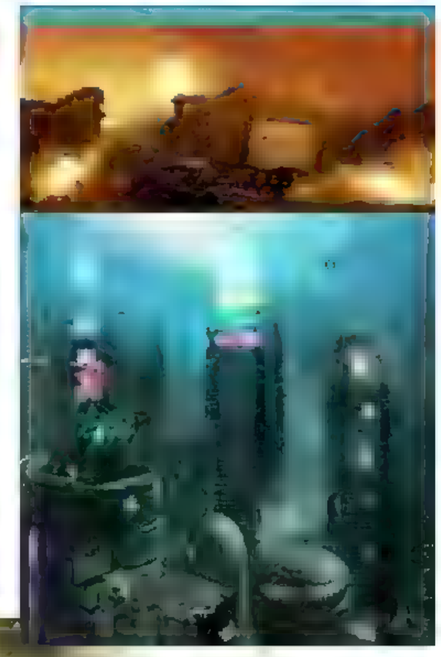
No artist has been signed yet, but it is understood DC is currently in discussion with a possible candidate.



MORE RESISTANCE...

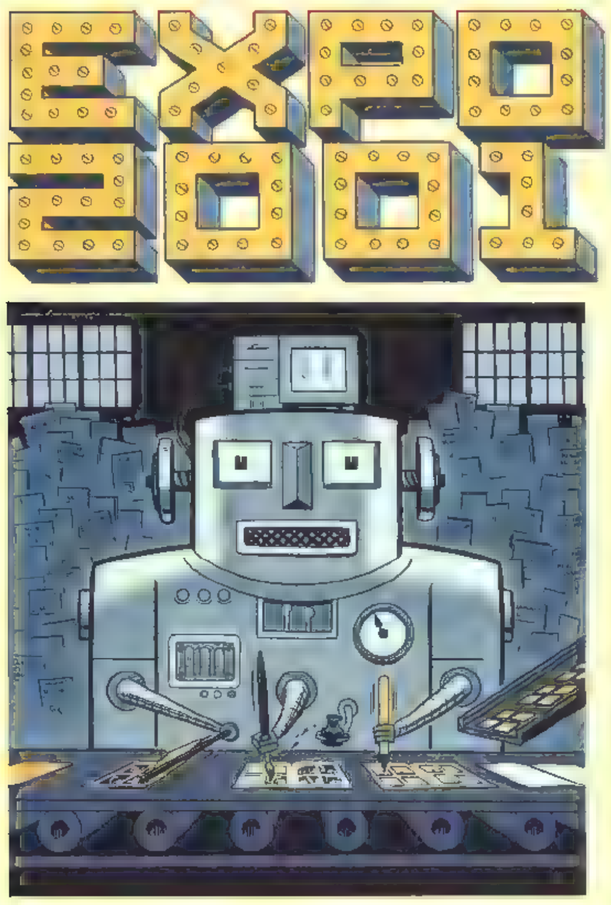
THIS just in from Jimmy Palmiotti – "four exclusive images from the amazing Christopher Shy, a new to the scene computer graphic artist".

The image to the left is the cover of **The Resistance** #7. The three sequential pages below are also from the Wildstorm series, but are the opening sequence of issue #5. The art is again by Christopher Shy, and shows the major accident that sets up the world in which the series takes place in.



12 O'clock Lock

This month Selina Lock considers anthology comics while stuck in public transport hell...



LAST month saw the release of the **SPX 2002** anthology; I was eager to pick it up, having enjoyed the previous three (EXPO) volumes. I had plenty of time to peruse it while stuck on trains, at train stations and buses for eight hours trying to get to and from Manchester (normally a 4 hour round trip!) *[Virgin Trains, eh? - Sympathetic Production Ed.]* Anyway, it eased the pain of travelling by entertaining me for a few hours - and it started me thinking about why I buy anthology comics.

I very rarely buy prose anthologies unless they showcase a favourite author, as the chances of my enjoying all the stories in the collection would be slim. I'd rather take a chance on a complete novel, with which I won't skip stories that don't appeal. This may be strange talk coming from the editor of **The Girly Comic**, a comics anthology, but bear with me...

For me, comics anthologies that contain complete short strips have these advantages:

- You get lots of stories for your money.
- I like my stories to be complete rather than ongoing, the same way I prefer trades to monthlies.
- I think the shorter form has more familiarity for those of us not brought up with comics. They remind me of newspaper strips: short, sharp blasts of stories or ideas.
- As a fan of and producer of small press comics, I find anthologies are good because they do not require you to have read the other issues of the comics and they don't depend as much on a regular schedule of publication.
- Where a prose story from an unknown author may seem initially daunting, the short page count of a comics anthology strip is more inviting. If one isn't to your taste, you can soon move onto the next.
- They allow you to sample the work of a lot of creators and lead you to seek out more of their work. This happened to me with the **Oni Press Colour Specials**; I now buy lots of Oni trades.
- The challenge of writing and drawing a short story can lead people to be innovative in the way they use the comic medium to tell their stories.

So why aren't there more anthologies lining the shelves? Well, like anything, they also have their disadvantages: diversity of content can put people off buying, and flicking through and seeing an art style not to your taste can make you discard the whole thing. This happened a few times with **The Girly Comic**.

Short strips can seem very inconsequential, leaving you feeling unsatisfied if you wanted more from the characters or the story. Like prose anthologies you could be left wondering why you bought it, if you only liked a small number of the stories in the collection.

When discussing the anthology form, the main disadvantages people cite are that they are expensive to produce and don't sell well. There must be some truth to this, as the editor has more creators to manage, and if the books sold well, there would be more of them around.

Another reason I like them is that I'm still relatively new to comics; I'm still looking around and trying to decide what kind of things I like. Anthologies such as **SPX 2002** are a great way for me to sample new creators in a cost-effective manner.

I'm not as keen about serial anthologies as many of the advantages are lost, especially if it is a small press comic with an irregular schedule. However, some anthology comics have spawned great characters, such as *Judge Dredd* from **2000AD** and *Tank Girl* from **Deadline**, and once again given us that diversity of creators not found in most comics.

I'd assumed there were very few anthology comics out there, but a recent discussion on the Bugpowder [UK Small Press] mailing list suggests there are quite a few of them about. Some titles mentioned in the discussion were **Stereoscomic Special** (French/European artists, translated into English), **Toenail Clippings**, **Sturgeon White Moss** and rumours of a new anthology from Nick Abadzis' Rising Trout Press.

Another new anthology discussed in the Sequential Tart forums, **Prophecy**, is aimed at non-comics readers, and will have a unique distribution model to get it in front of those readers, carrying an eclectic mix of strips from independent and alternative comics creators. Sounds like an interesting project and I wish them luck, but how many times have we heard about new publishers chasing the Holy Grail of new markets?

Still, if you're interested in broadening your reading tastes, you can't beat anthology comics to help point the way.

12 O'Clock Lock will return in On Her Majesty's Secret Service.

MULDER & SCULLY

RING RING

SCULLY? ITS MULDER!

DO YOU HAVE YOUR MILK DELIVERED?

ER... YES...

WHEN? WHEN DO YOU HAVE YOUR MILK DELIVERED?

MONDAYS, WEDNESDAYS AND FRIDAYS.

DAMN! SO DO I!

WHAT'S GOING ON, MULDER?

THIS MORNING, I OPENED MY FRONT DOOR AND FOUND **TWO** PINTS OF MILK OUTSIDE!

ITS TUESDAY! I DON'T HAVE MY MILK DELIVERED ON A TUESDAY, AND CERTAINLY NOT TWO PINTS! DO YOU KNOW WHOSE MILK IT MIGHT BE?

NO.

THE MILKMAN HAS PROBABLY MADE A MISTAKE. I'D HAVE THEM IF I WERE YOU.

ITS NOT MY TYPE OF MILK, SCULLY! THE DOCTOR TOLD ME NOT TO DRINK THIS TYPE OF MILK!

FOR GOD'S SAKE, MULDER! AT LEAST PUT THE MILK IN THE FRIDGE SO YOU CAN RETURN THEM TOMORROW!

I'M NOT TOUCHING IT, SCULLY! ITS STAYING EXACTLY WHERE IT IS!

I DON'T CARE IF IT **DOES** GO OFF!

Paul Rainey is currently away from his drawing board working on a covert mission behind enemy lines, attempting to find his way out of the new building his employers have placed him in. So this is a strip he did about two years ago. We don't know who it's supposed to be depicting or what the punch line means, but it's all he did...

THE VERDICT

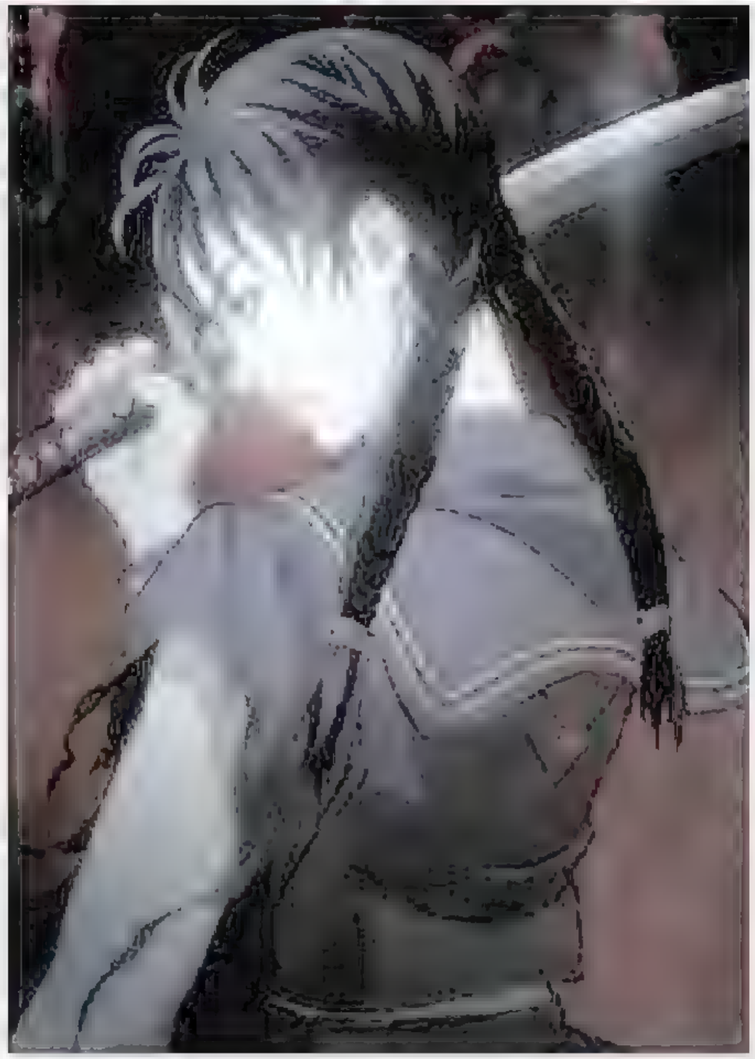
COMICS REVIEWS

Borderline's policy is that we don't mark a comic out of ten or some other archaic method of rating. A single comic or a series should be judged on a number of things, therefore we encourage our reviewers to make a judgement about a specific issue. This is why **Borderline**'s review column is the best and fairest in comics!

THIS MONTH'S JURY:

David R. Booth (DRB)
Rob Cave (RC)
Andrew Cheverton (AC)
Kelvin Green (KG)
Kev Hill (KH)
Rol Hirst (RH)
Mike Kidson (MK)
Andy Winter (AW)

Have you got a book that requires a Verdict?
Then send it to **Borderline** (details on page 2.)
Have you got a Verdict on a book? Yes? Then **Borderline** wants you!
Contact Andy Winter: reviews@borderlinemagazine.co.uk
for reviewing details.



Blood: The Last Vampire 2002

By Benkyo Tamaoki
Viz

This book acts as a sequel to the 2000 released Production IG animation *Blood: The Last Vampire*. It continues the tale of Saya, the lead character of the movie, transposing her from post-war Japan to her current appearance. Saya's hunt for Chiropterans, a form of vampire, continues, and she now has to infiltrate a high school in order to hunt down some particularly vicious creatures. Throughout the story Tamaoki's artwork is functional, if less detailed and less realistic than Katsuya Terada's character designs for the movie. There are, however, a couple of minor - no, I'm wrong, I meant major - flaws. Tamaoki, in his native Japan, is known for his "erotic" (read porn) comics, and so it is nothing if not inevitable that an element of porn appears within this comic. Considering the quality of the source material, this is completely unnecessary. The story itself is poorly conceived, taking the silent, unemotional lead and rewriting the history that was learnt during the movie. What you end up with is a heavily diluted alternate version of a dark, well written animated piece.

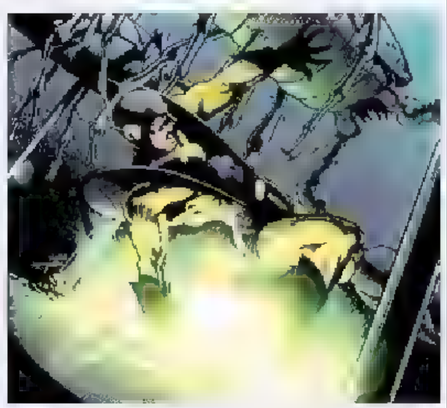
The Verdict: If you liked the movie, you really should avoid this. If you like trashy, light, pornographic tales of vampires, go ahead and buy it. (KH)

Avengers #59

By Geoff Johns and Kieron Dwyer
Marvel

There are, unfortunately, only two good moments this issue. The first is the late arrival of an arse-kicking Thor, an event that has become an Avengers cliché but still has dramatic weight. The second highlight is a neat little briefing room scene packed with fun one-liners and a neat cameo from Doctor Doom. Those high points aside, there is little to recommend here. The art is passable, but the writing slides from substandard to abysmal. The villain, for instance, is revealed - in a move reminiscent of the 1960s *Batman* TV series - to be a giant bloke in a cape with a magic key. Characterisation and scripting are likewise disappointing, with Warbird suddenly deciding to air a grievance from 1963, and a truly awful last line. The writing lacks depth and the retro-DC style means that at present this title cannot compete with Kurt Busiek's run, let alone **The Ultimates**.

The Verdict: This is The Avengers **as done by Joel Schumacher: camp, crass and crap. (KG)**

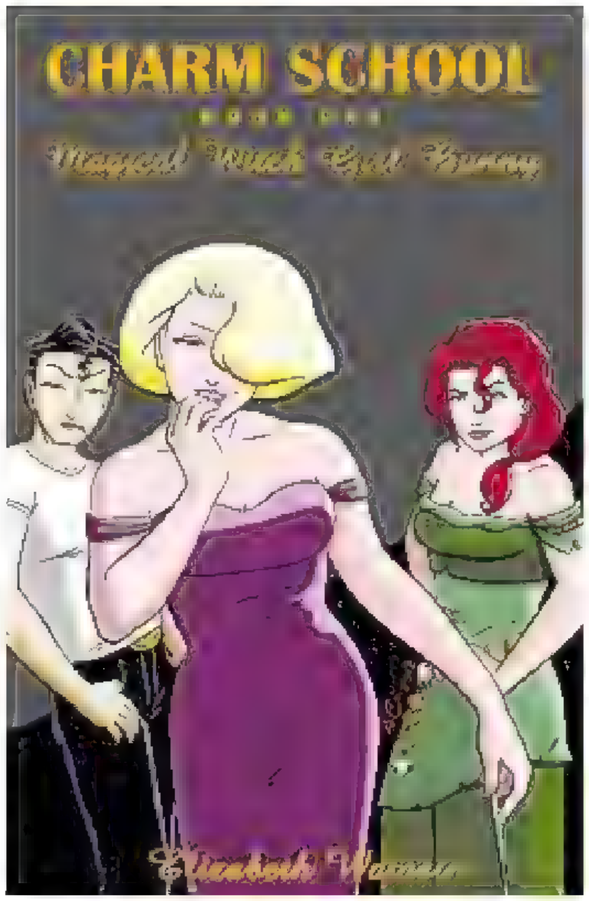


Charm School #6

By Elizabeth Watasin
Slave Labor

The Vampire Dragster Dean storyline continues as Dean and Fairer Than fight for the affections (and the body) of Bunny. Already this series has left behind the concerns of what sexual orientation each character possesses, not to mention to which mythological race they belong. It's refreshing not be hit over the head every issue with the fact that Dean is a mechanic vampire lesbian but rather, through accomplishments of script and subtleties of art, to be reminded of her jealousy and pain as her lover is wooed by an exotic rival.

Elizabeth Watasin treads a fine line with aplomb, mixing the innocent mores of *Bewitched* and *Happy Days* with the modern approaches to myth as seen in Neil Gaiman's **Sandman** and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. How she mixes this into something that works is a miracle, not so much because she makes it work, but because it does so in such an individual style.



The Verdict: The current trade collecting the first three issues (the Magical Witch Girl Bunny story) is a fine introduction to this sharp, whimsical and, well... charming series. (AC)

Daredevil/Bullseye: The Target #1

By Kevin Smith & Glenn Fabry
Marvel

This is a pile of shit.

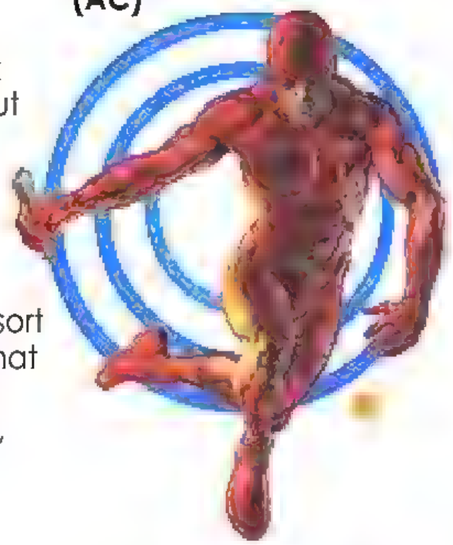
I have rarely in my life seen, heard or read such xenophobic and racist tripe as Smith presents us with here. His absolute disgust towards the Middle Eastern characters in this comic is beyond the reprehensible, and all to show us that Bullseye is a bad guy. I knew Bullseye was a bad guy, and if I didn't Smith handily wastes the entire first half of the issue retelling us his *Guardian Devil* storyline, along with yet another recap of DD's origin and some dreadfully late September 11 lamentations that seem shoehorned in just to add some social relevance. The appalling violence and disregard for human life exhibited by the terrorists here reduces them to comic book villains; Smith may think he's making a point, but all he's really saying is, "I'm a comic book writer who sees and thinks in terms of Good Vs Evil." On show here is the worst sort of patriotism, the sort that thinks in extreme terms with no middle ground, reducing real people from real situations to comic book villains that even manage to look 2D in a comic book.

Listen: "He calls himself Bullseye. I call him the Anti-Christ. He is hell's black heart and lost mind made flesh." Can you imagine writing that and not feeling embarrassed and ashamed about yourself?

Then, just when the cynicism and lassitude get too much, the awkward and redundant alteration of the comic's Bullseye into the version to be seen in the upcoming *Daredevil* movie hits you on the last page.

Read this and just try not to die inside.

The Verdict: Marvel are taking the money and running. Smith is taking the money and waddling. (AC)



Dogwitch #1

By Daniel Schaffer
Sirius Comics

Violet Grimm lives in the forest. She shags things and does magick. That this series was advertised with the tagline "*Sex And The City meets The Evil Dead*" tells you all you really need to know, aside from the fact that Violet is a leather-clad Goth Chick with polka dot knickers. Those are all my bases covered very nicely.

Schaffer writes well, if anarchically, throwing a lot of stuff against the wall to see what sticks. Luckily a lot of it does stick, including a brilliantly funny gag to which the artist deservedly devotes an entire page for full effect. The art is very assured, solidly inked with a fine eye for detail and roundness. Unless I miss my guess, Schaffer is a leg man, although his breasts and bums are great too, if you see what I mean.

Goth girls, eh? You can't go too far wrong, can you?

The Verdict: A bit of a madcap approach, backed up by a good sense of humour and a very skilled art style. Excellent material if you keep a whip in your valise. (AC)

Global Frequency #1

By Warren Ellis & Garry Leach
DC/Wildstorm

The high concept pitch of this series is that each of its 12 issues will feature a member of the Global Frequency, one of a number of 1000 individuals who will respond to earth-threatening disaster situations with appropriate force, a particularly English laissez-faire and quite possibly a cigarette or two.

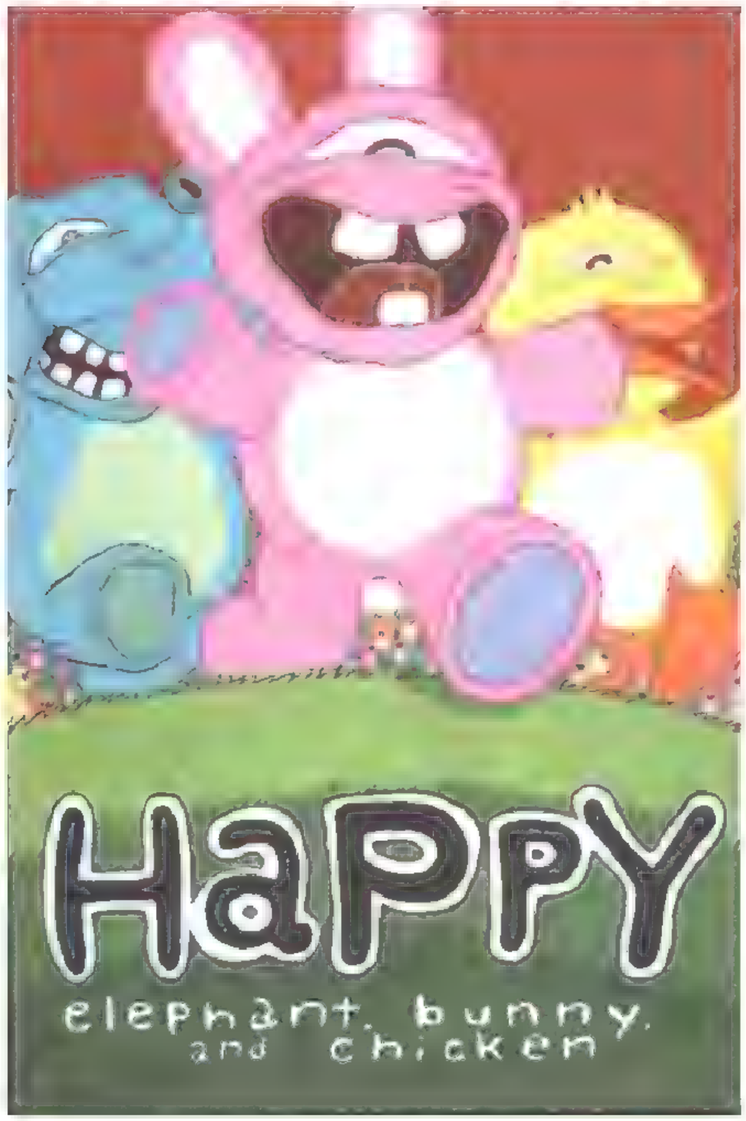
The low concept is that you're Warren Ellis, you used to write **Ministry of Space**, **Planetary** and **Transmetropolitan**, and you could quite do with a regular monthly income, but luckily you have notebooks full of **Planetary** and **Authority** research that you're never going to need so you may as well make use of it, even if you can't think of a story line that wraps itself around the neat one-line concepts you can't bear to see go to waste.

So, we have a bloke who is about to open a wormhole in his brain that will transport a nuclear device from its underground silo in Russia right into the middle of San Francisco. Enter the Global Frequency, who track him down and shoot him in the head. Good show. Mine's a Guinness, mate.

There's nothing actually wrong with this comic. It's quick, intriguing and punchy and the art is sumptuous and engaging. The pacing is particularly effective, only hindered by four consecutive pages of adverts right in the middle of the exposition scene and another two featuring a gorgeous redhead advertising *The Sims* on PS2 towards the end of the same scene.

What was I talking about again? Umm. No – it's gone...

The Verdict: High concept, pop sci-fi comics; but without a framing narrative this is going to wear thin after about three issues, let alone twelve. (AC)



Happy #2

By Josh Simmons
Top Shelf

There are more of the first issue's happy bunnies (and elephants and chickens) on the cover, but inside Simmons is playing a different game this time.

The first half is given over to a lengthy rant about autobiographical comics, followed by an autobiographical comic. At first reading you might be forgiven for thinking that Simmons is being straight-faced when he presents seven pages of his own "talking head", sitting at a drawing board explaining how lots of people see the genre as being tedious, badly-drawn navel gazing on the part of very sad people, when really it's all very exciting and meaningful. The denouement of the autobiographical strip he appends as an example might just have you wondering a bit, though...

Then the second half rams the sarcasm of it all home, with a little story about the King of the World searching for a friend. Where the first half is drawn as minimally as possible - just ratty outline sketching of Simmons' head and drawing table - the second story is devoted to showing lots of different geographical locations, drawn superbly in a highly detailed lined, stippled and hatched style. I suppose we won't be seeing any more autobiographical work from him, then.

The Verdict: A very nice line in mockery from a considerable talent. (MK)

The League Of Extraordinary Gentlemen Volume Two: Bumper Compendium #1

By Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill
ABC/DC Comics

The first two issues of the second story arc are reprinted together here and point to the very real possibility that this volume will be even better than the previous tale. The opening chapter, set during a skirmish on the surface of Mars, contains breathtaking artwork and truly dramatic writing, as well as fleshing out Moore's fictional Victorian universe. The second chapter, reintroducing our heroes just as the Martian advance begins, similarly fleshes out the personalities and backstories of the League whilst keeping the excitement levels up. The art is as good as ever, and Moore's writing effortlessly jumps from character interaction to comedy to drama. As light-hearted as the concept of this series is, the execution is exemplary, making it so much more than a gimmick-driven title.

The Verdict: Great fun and brilliantly produced, this is one of the best comics available anywhere. (KG)

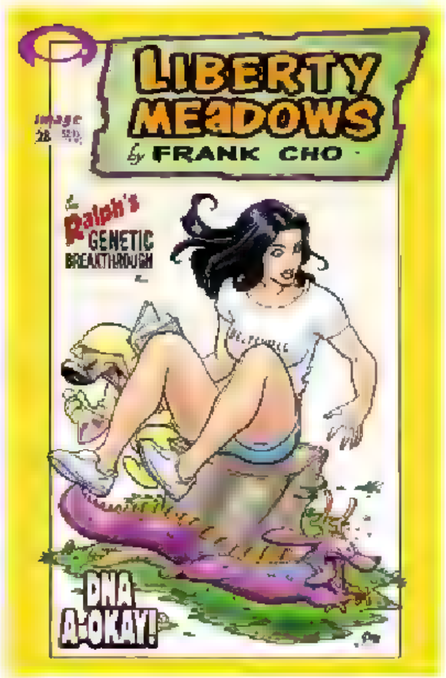
Liberty Meadows #28

By Frank Cho; Image

Had Dave Stevens, or prior to that Bill Stout, been born into this industry at the time of the Internet then they might have become as self-obsessed and irritating as Frank "Monkey Boy" Cho. Both of those aforementioned greats probably wonder what they did wrong to be ignored while this joker grabs the spotlight. As you might guess, I've managed to steer clear of the **Liberty Meadows** appreciation society - a body of people who seem to think that Cho draws the sexiest women in the world, has the funniest sense of humour and probably saves drowning kittens in flash floods.

He's a clever man. He drops in allusions to all the reference material he's ever used. Therefore he manages to make the reader forget that he's about the most derivative of creators to ever grace a newspaper or a comicbook. Cho is a poor man's cheesecake artist, who just happens to tap into the same zeitgeist that many cartoonists with more talent in their little fingers have tapped into. His line of small cute animals, hapless male leads and strong, sexy and most definitely robust women is just the sort of thing brain-dead American morons will lap up. Apparently this comic has been a huge success for Image outside of their usual retail outlets. I'm surprised they haven't got Brandy with her tits hanging out on every cover!

Yes, I found this comic offensive and devoid of real creative talent. Cho is a stylish self-promoter with a clean, eye-catching line and that homely **Calvin and Hobbes** feel about his work. But there's **Hagar** in there as well, and **Peanuts**, and most any other famous US cartoonist of the last 100 years. Cho has amalgamated all of the best things about gag cartooning and is flagrantly selling it as his own stuff.



This issue follows the main running theme of genetic alterations, DNA jokes and has very little of the trademark large-breasted and pneumatic Brandy (which will presumably mean fewer blocked toilets from used Kleenex in the mid-west this month). It basically borrows jokes from many a comic of the last 50 years and while some people might think Cho is a bit of a genius, to me he comes across as a bit of a plonker.

The Verdict: I'm impressed with Cho's ability to draw naked women riding on the backs of dinosaurs. Except that has nothing to do with this quaintly decorated bag of emptiness. Don't encourage the man – drop this from your order as soon as you can. You do know he's conning all of us, don't you? (DRB)

Mek #1

By Warren Ellis and Steve Rolston

Homage

As a writer, one of the things Warren Ellis is most adept at is grabbing hold of other creators' ideas and styles, then spinning them off in a totally unexpected direction. He infused **Transmetropolitan** with the spirit of Hunter S. Thompson and "gonzo" journalism, DV8 were an adolescent superhero team that owed rather more to Larry Clark's controversial film, *Kids*, than they ever did to the Teen Titans, while **Planetary** spliced Lee and Kirby with the *X-Files* to produce something startlingly different from either.

With this three issue miniseries Ellis is at it again, this time channelling celebrated Brit sci-fi novelist Jeff Noon (and particularly his debut book, **Vurt**) to serve up an intriguing glimpse into the future of alternative youth culture. In Ellis's rave new world tattoos and body piercings have been superseded by "mek" (it's short for "massive enhancement culture"), a development which sees any self-respecting urban teen sporting an exotic array of cybernetic enhancements and robotic implants. Noon combined virtual reality gaming and good old-fashioned 21st century drugs to bring us his characters' vice of choice - "vurt feathers" - and Ellis works something similar here as the mek-ed up denizens of his world chase their ultimate highs through the appropriation of mechanised wings and electrified tongues rather than with powder, herb or needle. He makes the mek = drugs metaphor even plainer when it becomes clear that there's a lucrative black market for "bad mek", a state of affairs characterised by violence between competing suppliers, and that the book's main character, Sarissa Leon, is a former big cheese on the mek scene turned professional advocate for the culture's acceptance and legalisation. Think of her as a massively enhanced Howard Marks.

This first issue follows Marissa as she returns to an unnamed city (presumably New York) after five years away. She's come back in the hope of discovering what really happened to R.J. Coin, her old running buddy and lover, who, it transpires, has been killed while supposedly dealing bad mek. Her return is hardly that of a prodigal daughter - she no longer fits in with the mek crowd and the city itself is a stranger to her. And that's it. Ellis keeps both plot and dialogue to a minimum as he and artist Steve Rolston lovingly build a detailed picture of mek culture which culminates in the book's best moment. Heading back to her hotel Marissa encounters a mek-heavy bald guy sitting on the steps of a tattoo parlour. He gives her a warning - don't dig too deep into RJ's death - before transforming himself into a wonderfully freakish cyber-dog that recalls both the maniacal Toby from *The Ballad Of Halo Jones* and Noon's own man/dog hybrids from **Vurt**.

Somehow Rolston's cartoonish art never quite looked right in black and white titles such as **Queen & Country** and even the recent **Pounded** miniseries. It works much better here, aided and abetted by Al Gordon's clean, crisp inking job and David Baron's vibrant colours. Between them they bring **Mek**'s city crackling to life, particularly in the first few pages set in and around a "sky-rail" station and later on when the action moves to a seedy bar. There's nothing flashy about it, Rolston's just very good at capturing and creating an atmosphere, at understanding what a futuristic cityscape might look, feel and smell like. He then pulls you right on into it and, more importantly, makes you believe in it too.

The Verdict: Mek **has the potential to be Ellis's best work since the early days of** Transmetropolitan, **while the colour format finally gives Rolston's art the showcase it deserves. (AW)**

Judge Dredd Megazine #4.17

By Various Creators
Rebellion

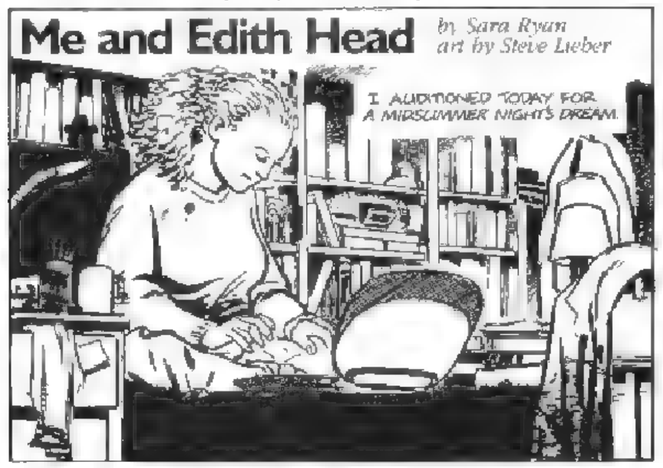
The **War Of The Worlds**-inspired *Scarlet Traces* and the *Rogue Trooper* reprints are highlights of this month's bumper anthology, and yet the best strip this month comes from the series of the most variable quality. The sometimes disappointing *Durham Red: Apocrypha* series enters into an inspired crossover with the classic WWII vampire tale *Fiends of the Eastern Front*. Such a crossover is wonderfully logical in the context of this current series and is brilliantly realised by writer Dan Abnett and artist Carlos Ezquerra. Elsewhere, the anthology is of the usual high quality, although the *Young Middenface McNulty* strip fails to impress.

The Verdict: A wonderfully varied and balanced anthology, always entertaining and often excellent. (KG)

Me And Edith Head

By Sara Ryan & Steve Lieber
Cold Water Press

Originally published in *Cicada* magazine and featuring a character from Ryan's novel **Empress Of The World**, this chapbook representation of the Eisner Award nominated story is practically a textbook example of how to self-publish a personal comic and make it a beautiful object in and of itself.


Me and Edith Head
by Sara Ryan
art by Steve Lieber
I AUDITIONED TODAY FOR A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM.
I WANT TO BE TITANIA, FALLING IN LOVE WITH A JACKASS IS WORTH IT IF YOU GET TO BE THE QUEEN OF THE FAIRIES.
YOU TOLD ME YOU PAID THE VISA BILL! OR DID YOU JUST SAY THAT SO YOU COULD GET OUT THE DOOR TO YOUR INFINITELY FASCINATING SOCIAL LIFE?
THERE'S NO NEED TO TAKE THAT TONE, JANET!
GETTING OUT OF THE HOUSE FOR REHEARSALS WOULD, OF COURSE, BE AN EXTRA BONUS.

The cover card stock is smooth and delicately coloured, lending an elegant simplicity to the cover design as well as feeling pleasant to the touch. The interior paper is crisply white and ever so slightly thicker than the flimsy rubbish almost everyone seems to use in comics these days. The stapling, for God's sake, is perfect.

Steve Lieber illustrates with his usual grace, mixing an economy of line with an eye for detail that lifts each image up and off the page. It's a true credit to both his art and Ryan's scripting that the sixteen pages on offer here actually manage to feel like a much longer story.

The Verdict: An attractive and carefully presented mini-comic that should shame most other companies into overhauling their entire production processes. (AC)

Radioactive Man #106

By Batton Lash, Mike De Carlo and Bob Smith
Bongo Comics

The massive and enduring success of *The Simpsons* isn't just down to its being a smart kids' show; it's helped enormously by all the old in-jokes and pop culture gags layered in for the mums and dads too. So it isn't surprising that the comics publishing arm of Matt Groening's empire follows suit, with one title aimed squarely at the middle aged.

The idea of **Radioactive Man** is that it's Bart Simpson's favourite superhero comic, it's been running for almost 50 years, and each issue published in the real world comes from somewhere in that 50 year run, expertly aping the design and editorial style of one particular publisher which flourished at the time of the issue number. Last time it was the early 80s, First Comics and specifically Chaykin's American Flagg; the one before that was pre-Code horror; the one before that was Marvel circa 1970... and so on.

This time the year is 1963 and the target is Gold Key, with just a touch of Dell; after all both companies are fondly remembered for their superb painted covers and really dreadful interior art. The story, as ever, doesn't matter much (Radioactive Man combines elements of Superman, Batman and The Hulk, and goes through the usual secret identity shenanigans and super-villain punch ups). The stylistic parody is, also as ever, spot on, although the Gold Key style is presumably now so long forgotten that a few details are flagged up; a writer to the fake letter column complains about the typical lack of borders and the rectangular speech balloons characteristic of Gold Key, and a gold key is part of the plot. This makes things a little more strained and self-conscious than is usual with this title; but if you're going to buy it, the chances are you'll remember the comics being affectionately parodied well enough to get a lot of laughs out of it.

The Verdict: An affectionate parody which will vastly amuse those old enough to be all nostalgic about the comics they loved in the 1960s. (MK)

Savage Dragon/Hellboy

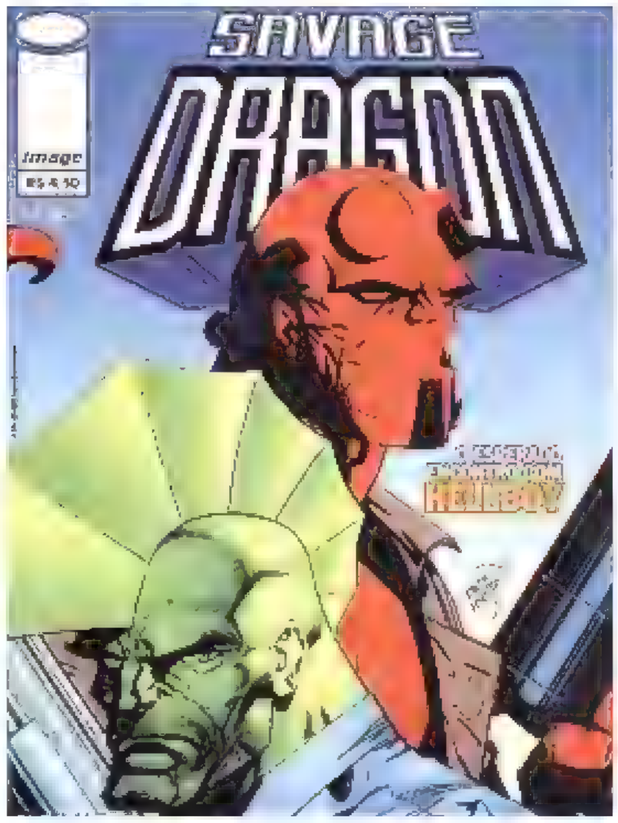
By Eric Larsen w/Mike Mignola
Image

This is awful.

No, actually it isn't. What it is is 48 pages of utter nonsense, but it actually sort of works. What lets it down is Larsen's increasingly awful artwork, but that's about it. It has a Mel Brooks-ish plot involving Hitler's brain, a big gorilla, something Kirbyesque from under the sea and lots of seemingly unrelated characters running around like, er, vampires. It's a good bit of fun even if I didn't really understand any of it.

That last might have something to do with my having stopped reading **Savage Dragon** before it reached its second birthday. Now, 10 years down the line, it seems that the character is a parody of his early days. This won't be a bad thing at all if it means that his regular comic comes from as far out of left field as this.

The Verdict: I would have been happier with it being a standard comic without the needless prestige format. But as a good example of ephemeral comicbooks this rocks. (DRB)



Transformers Generation One #6

By Chris Sarracini and Pat Lee
Dreamwave Productions

In a bumper sized finale, the creative team fails miserably to rescue this underachieving series. The characterisation is still way off, the subplots continue to make very little sense, and the art continues to look amateurish. A particularly silly and rather embarrassing "tribute" to the emergency services of September 11 battles with a couple of bizarre plot twists for the privilege of being the stupidest part of a stupid comic, while some last minute naïve moralising tells us, in a terribly unsubtle way, what is plainly obvious. This has been an embarrassingly bad series, so it has a fitting climax.

The Verdict: As good/bad as the rest of the series. (KG)

Uberbabe #1

By Lisa Voldeng & Fish Griwkowsky
Sugarlab

The design of this comic alone is worth the asking price: 6 inches square, its twelve pages of story told on one continuous strip of paper, then folded like an accordion to form a comic, which is slipped into a dust jacket and provided with its own little comic bag. How about that?

Inside we get a quirky little tale of a Japanese fisherboy who suspends himself from the wing of a plane and then gets whisked into an air battle when a blonde woman jumps into the plane and takes off. There's also a moustachioed dog floating on a rug and wearing a cushion on its head, who decides not to interfere in the affairs of piteous humans.

The story is surprisingly wide-ranging given the short page count, any lapses in coherence mostly down to artist Griwkowsky's tendency to slip from solid blacks to a sketchy and then scribbly style, which makes some pictures slow to emerge, particularly when he goes from one extreme to the other within two panels.

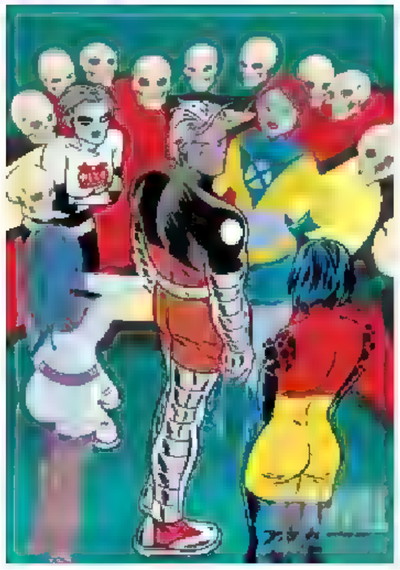
The Verdict: Fantastically clever and unique packaging design, slightly let down by a less-polished comic inside. (AC)

Vertigo Pop! London #1

By Peter Milligan and Philip Bond
Vertigo

The story here is a familiar one of aging British rock stars, although a late twist promises some unexpected events ahead. Familiar as the premise is, Milligan's strong writing brings the characters to life wonderfully, transcending cliché to create an interesting tale of an unusual family. That said, the true highlight of the comic is the art of Philip Bond, an underestimated and underused artist who brings a vibrant and modern look to the title with his rough cartoon-style drawing. If there's any justice, this series will bring more attention to this unique artist.

The Verdict: Entertaining writing and superb art make this a lot better than the premise suggests. (KG)



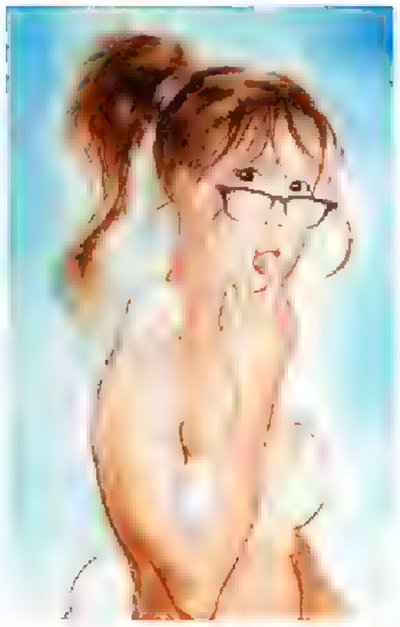
X-Statix #4
By Peter Milligan and Michael Allred
Marvel

Frank Quitely on **X-Statix**? No wonder they all look so weird on the cover! Inside, all is normal, which is to say Milligan's writing is top-notch and Allred's art is as impressive as ever. This issue is less quirky and deliberately different from previous issues, as Milligan sets about getting the team back together in the midst of a battle with a zombie horde. Underneath the conventional superheroic elements, however, it is clear that Milligan has more surprises under his sleeve, making this an exciting read yet again.
The Verdict: Nothing's changed; this is still the best mainstream comic available. (KG)

Zero Girl: Full Circle #1
By Sam Kieth
Homage

A more than welcome sequel to 2001's **Zero Girl** mini-series, **Full Circle** catches up with Amy and Tim many years later; Amy now writes music reviews and Tim has a teenage daughter who can make people do what she wants when she thinks of squares.

Yet what it's about isn't really definable, and the overt weirdness really isn't what **Zero Girl** is about. Some might see this as a backward step after the ultra-realism of **Four Women**, but it's such faultless and particular storytelling that, eventually, the things that should work against it begin to work for it.
The Verdict: Perfect stuff, but maybe not the best place to start for latecomers. (AC)



GOOD COP – BAD COP

Every month Borderline offers two very different views of a new comic. This month one of Marvel's Spider-titles gets both panned and praised...

Spider-Man's Tangled Web #19
By Robbie Morrison and Jim Mahfood
Marvel

After the excellent **Ultimate Marvel Team-Up** of last year, Jim Mahfood returns to **Spider-Man** with another top notch story, this time written by **2000AD**'s Robbie Morrison. Mahfood is as excellent as ever, perfectly portraying the comic tale of super-villains failing to go straight. Morrison proves that he has no problem tackling the Marvel Universe, portraying it from a skewed comic angle while still managing to evoke feelings of pity for the hapless criminals. This is a true tragic comedy, and it is impossible not to feel for C-list villain Grizzly as he tries to become a normal citizen, no matter how funny his predicament becomes, which is of course a sign of excellent writing. This is an excellent example of what comics can be capable of, and complements the more "serious" end of the Spider-Man mythos surprisingly well.
The Verdict: A superb comic and a great Marvel Universe debut for one of 2000AD's finest creators. (Kelvin Green is the Good Cop)

You see <snicker> Spider-Man, right, he has all these <tee-hee> really dumb villains who dress up as <smirk> rhinos and typewriters and grizzly bears and... oh, for crying out loud – GROW UP! This is supposed to be an intelligent book examining what it's really like to live in Spider-Man's world, but lately it's turning into a juvenile titter at the expense of some dumbed-down badguys - and worse still, it's not even funny. Anyone can take the piss, guys, there's nothing clever in that. If you really want to write about these loser characters, how about giving them some heart and soul - take Milligan's *Flowers For Rhino* or DeMatteis' '90's Electro story *Light The Night* as examples? Otherwise, stop wasting our time, money and trees - cancel this book and put us all out of our misery.
The Verdict: Is anyone really wondering why this is the lowest selling Spider-book? (Rol Hirst is the Bad Cop)

After The Snooter

By Eddie Campbell
Eddie Campbell
Books

Autobiographical comics don't come much richer or stranger than this.

It's all about growing old, or perhaps growing up (if there's a difference). The mysterious Snooter, portrayed either as an insect or a man in insect costume, is a recurring symbol of responsibility, of common sense, of the drive to settle down and be a sober citizen that haunts Campbell's nights with horror and deprives him of sleep. If its siren call has succeeded to any degree in effecting a sea change, it may be manifested in the fact that, for the first time, this book is about Eddie Campbell, not Alec McGarry. Old aliases and alibis are dropped, old haunts and friends are revisited... and Campbell takes stock of his life so far. Looking at his account of all this, you can't help reflecting on how long these autobiographical comics have been with us now; that frequent, often too easy view of them as self-indulgence on the part of twenty-something slackers crumbles away as you realise that one of the originators is now, in effect, writing about a mid-life crisis.

Not that **After The Snooter** is all doom, gloom and greying hairs; Campbell's too deft and vital an artist for that. The theme of aging is interwoven with happy scenes of family life, adventures with cats, an exhilarating account of the Hollywood premiere of *From Hell* and, of course, a certain amount of fine wine imbibed with relish (although even the wisdom of that is questioned here). The whole is a massive diary of thoughts, reflections, activities... a portrait of the artist as a no longer so young man, in fact. The art is, as ever, taut, functional and sometimes provocative; the writing meanders and focuses in equal measure, capturing and suggesting insights which may often seem more profound than really they are, but hey, that's part of the heightening effect of art.

The Verdict: This may not be one for the young in search of excitement, or for the older in search of recaptured youth - but it may be the finest comics collection I've read this year. (MK)

Agent 327: De Vergeten Bom

By Martin Lodewijk
Meulenhoff-M

OK, so this was published eighteen months ago - but it hasn't had a review in an English language magazine, and it's significant because it marked the return to publication of a classic Dutch comics series after a fifteen year hiatus. The reasons for the revival aren't hard to guess – 80s nostalgia is big, plus the Austin Powers films have made spy spoofs hot again, so Lodewijk has been able to work a nice deal, getting his Bond parody into the national daily *Algemeen Dagblad* and the album collections published by major literary publisher Meulenhoff, whose excellent distribution has put it into bookshops and newsagents throughout The Netherlands.

Lodewijk is probably best known to English language readers as the writer of the science fiction series **Storm**, painted by Don Lawrence (Brits with longish memories may recall Marvel UK's serialisation of *The Pirates of Pandarve* in their 80s magazine **Strip)**, but like most Lowlands comics professionals he's always been highly versatile, capable of producing first rate work in many genres, and also capable of drawing and writing equally well. **Agent 327** was always a slapstick comedy, and Lodewijk revives it wittily here, beginning with the reconstitution of the distinctly shoestring Dutch Secret Service to combat problems left over after the end of the Cold War while first having to deal with the fact that their old HQ has been rented out as a brothel. Meanwhile Agent 327 himself has been working as a hire limo chauffeur and the Chief of the service has been living in a dumper, hooked on day time soaps...

Once it gets going, the story is more or less business as it always was, as the fairly hapless 327 deals with the threat of leftover Soviet nuclear warheads with a lot of dumb luck and much aid from his statuesque and morally ambiguous freelance associate Olga Lawina. Lodewijk is in no way out to make serious topical references; the name of the game is "comedy thriller with tight, fast moving plot and a sprinkling of local in-jokes", and he achieves those aims with consummate professionalism.

One thing has notably changed, though. Back in the '70s and '80s **Agent 327** was serialised in the children's weekly comic **Eppo**, but now it's appearing only in a daily newspaper. Lodewijk acknowledges this shift from juvenile to adult audience in one simple way – sex. The size of Olga Lawina's breasts has approximately doubled, as has that of her eyes, and occasional discreet sex scenes are dotted about. It's all very mild stuff - and Lawina remains far too tough and capable a character for her transformation to be dismissed as mere sexist stereotyping - but it's interesting to see this particular reaction to the shifting patterns of Dutch comics publication, not least because it follows US trends of the '90s. And, for that matter, Austin Powers. Still, together with Meulenhoff's distribution clout, you can be sure it's helping to attract the paying customers.

The Verdict: Fast moving comedy, fine cartoony art and a smattering of sex appear to add up to a winning formula for this revival of an old Dutch favourite. (MK)

Deadline

By Bill Rosemann and Guy Davis
Marvel

Daily Bugle reporter Kat Farrell has little time for the "capes" of Marvel's New York, she'd much rather be a serious journalist. But Kat, like most comicbook fans, just can't escape them darn superheroes. The street-level approach to the Marvel Universe is hardly an innovation, but Bill Rosemann's debut book succeeds by neither looking up in awe nor down its nose at its source material. Unlike Kurt Busiek's **Marvels**, which contented itself with being merely a bystander to the impossible, **Deadline** is driven by both plot (an old-fashioned detective yarn complete with red herrings and final act unmasking) and character. Kat Farrell is a gem of a character - in scruffy hair, dowdy clothes and glasses, she's a hundred times more attractive than any of the pneumatic-chested bimbos that populate most super-hero books. Rosemann writes her well, only occasionally lapsing into single gal cliché (maybe only British readers will cringe at the "does my bum look big in this?" line, but the Bridget Jones-y reference to "grandma knickers" is a bit too obvious a steal). Guy Davis is the perfect choice for artist, bringing a realistic beauty to Kat and her world that cheesecake cover artist Greg Horn won't ever appreciate. Horn's covers are by far the worst things here: totally inappropriate, they look like sexually suggestive perfume advertising, all airbrushed glamour, eyelashes fluttering behind sexy glasses. Ugghh. So don't judge this book by its covers... and don't expect it to be all gritty, slice-of-life stuff either, as there's a strong supernatural element to the plot which I hadn't expected, but which Rosemann just about gets away with in the larger-than-life setting.

The Verdict: Now that he's left his day job in the Marvel PR machine, let's hope Bill Rosemann spends a little more time writing. While not yet a star, he shows a lot promise - just like his heroine. (RH)

DV8: Neighbourhood Threat

By Warren Ellis, Humberto Ramos, Michael Lopez and others
Wildstorm/Titan Books

It's frightening to consider it, but Warren Ellis's vision of what real world superheroes would actually be like is probably pretty accurate. Selfish, humanity-hating brats addicted to violence, sadomasochistic sex and every drug they can lay their hands on, the "heroes" of **DV8** aren't a particularly sympathetic bunch. It's to Ellis's credit, therefore, that he makes us warm to them, developing humanity and comradeship as the stories progress, offering a glimpse of redemption for at least some. Of course, the misanthropic cynic in me argues that this is where Ellis and the "real" world part company - who'd ever have thought I'd be accusing him of being an optimist?

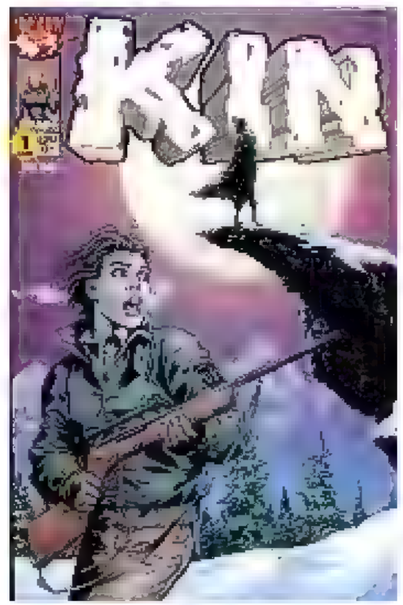
DV8 is, Ellis claims, an attempt to bring the "hand grenade" style of Larry Clark's *Kids* to comicbook superheroes. Unfortunately, the attempt is undermined by the flashy Image-style artwork, which plays up the surface gore and gaudiness whilst cheapening the more serious issues underneath. It's all a bit too glamorous - which is the last thing that could be said of *Kids*.

The Verdict: Grubby, trashy, exploitative fun. You'll enjoy it, but you might want a bath afterwards. (RH)

Kin: Descent of Man

By Gary Frank
Top Cow Prods

Gary Frank is possibly one of the most important comics creators in the UK at the moment. This, his first project as writer *and* artist, reads like a polished screenplay to a film with sequels already written. His art never drops below superb and the scripting, while awkward at times, flowed well. **The Verdict: More soon, please! (DRB)**

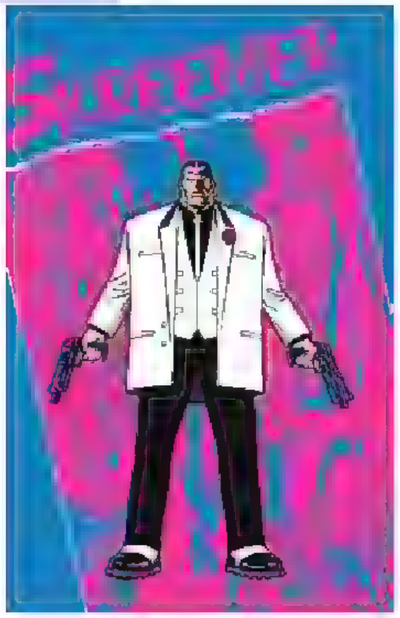


London's Dark

By James Robinson and Paul Johnson
Titan Books

If, like me, you'd never heard of James Robinson prior to **Starman**, here's a chance to see where this wonderful writer came from. Originally published in 1989, **London's Dark** is a love story set amid the blackouts, rationing and air raids of WWII London. It's also a thriller, a supernatural murder mystery, and - as you'd expect from Robinson - a thoroughly researched evocation of times past. Really, how many comics have you read that name drop George Formby and powdered egg? And you won't only find these touches in Robinson's script but in Paul Johnson's art too, a collage of vintage newspapers, ARP posters and Lyons Coffee tins. His work is fluid, cinematic and varied, rendered in such a beautiful black and white it almost makes you wish colour hadn't ever been invented. It certainly makes you wish Johnson had stayed in comics longer than he did.

The Verdict: A heartwarming romance about struggling to survive the brutality of being left at home during a war. Just as contradictory as that sounds! (RH)



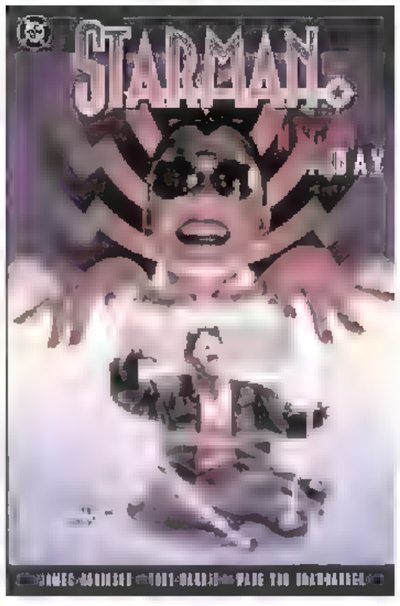
Skreemer

By Peter Milligan, Brett Ewins and Steve Dillon;
Vertigo /Titan Books

To celebrate 10 years of DC's Vertigo imprint, one of its earliest mini-series is finally collected in all its head-spinning glory. **Skreemer** is one of the few early Vertigo books I missed out on at the time, and I really only remember it being promoted as a sci-fi/gangster yarn that sounded more at home in **2000AD** than at "Mature Readers" DC. Ten years later, having come to realise that Peter Milligan is one of the best adult comic writers we have, I approached this collection with a little more excitement... but still had absolutely no idea what to expect.

This is *not* a sci-fi/gangster story. Yes, the lead characters are gangsters; yes, the setting is dystopian future, but it'd be wrong to shackle this book to any limiting genre category when it's so much more besides. Taking his cue from James Joyce, Milligan presents a fascinating study of free will vs. predetermination, a complex plot that leaps back and forward in time to question the patterns and cycles of life and death, centring on the rise and fall of a man cursed by his past and trapped by his future. It's audacious, but he pulls it off - and thankfully keeps the dialogue flashes of Joycean stream-of-consciousness to a minimum. Meanwhile, co-creator Brett Ewins and inker Steve Dillon set about establishing a look which would become almost a house style for Vertigo over the next few years, mixing grit and violence with "matter of fact" cartooning and the occasional show-off image that sticks in your mind long after you've set the book aside.

The Verdict: A reminder of what made Vertigo great... and that they rarely make books this smart anymore. (RH)



Starman: *Sins of the Father* and *Night and Day*

By James Robinson, Tony Harris and Wade Von Grawbadger;
DC/Titan Books

Another comic that's now headed towards the small screen, and as these first two collected volumes demonstrate, if handled well **Starman** should make an excellent superhero TV show. It's a book that plays down gaudy costumes and overlong fight scenes, spending its time instead on genuine character development and themes of family and belonging. Jack Knight is a reluctant hero - a rebel without either cause or clue. He's afraid of dying and in the midst of battle thinks only of running away or calling the police, or of what his father might have done in a similar situation. And nothing illustrates the Freudian father/son conflict of **Starman** better than the idea of Ted Knight handing down a Cosmic Rod to his two male children. Frederick Wertham would have had a ball with this book!

Starman is a book steeped in history - of family (the Knights, the O'Dares, The Mist and his ever more wayward daughter Nash); of a heroic legacy (the only Starman not to get a mention in this book is John Carpenter's); and of a city (Opal, a stunningly realised jewel that, thanks largely to Tony Harris, puts Gotham and Metropolis to shame). It's also a book in which the characters really develop. In these two volumes alone, arch-foe Nash goes from being a stuttering little daddy's girl to a cold, manipulative psychotic – and there's worse ahead. And yes, it's a book about collecting, a book in which even the villains are obsessed with old films, baseball cards, gramophones or magical Hawaiian shirts. If that occasionally becomes a little overdone, just ask yourself - would you rather they were talking about world domination again?

The Verdict: Consistently the best superhero book of the '90's? Pretty much. (RH)

Tank Girl Volume 3

By Jamie Hewlett and Alan Martin; Titan Books

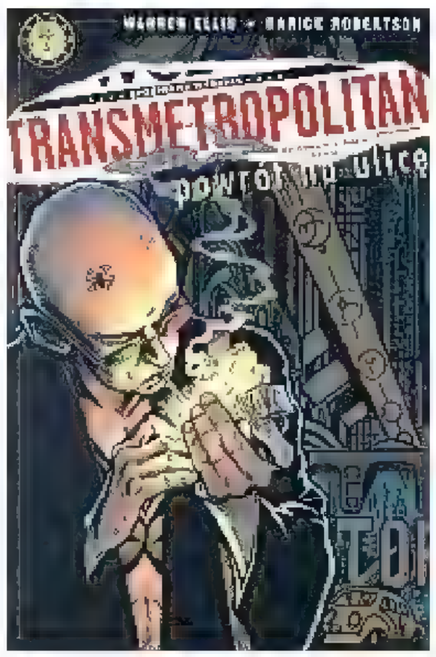
The final 'proper' volume of the obnoxious counter-culture heroine's exploits is something of a disappointment, all in all. Although the art tries to maintain the anarchic and vibrant look of previous volumes, it does appear a little tired. The detail-packed panels of the early strips are replaced with sparse and empty-looking pages that contain little of the energy usually associated with the title. The writing is less funny than usual, seeming somewhat strained as if Martin is trying too hard to capture the feel of earlier strips. As a result, the episodic nature of the strip comes across as bitty and fractured. That said, this is still an entertaining title with a great deal of energy and excitement, albeit one that pales into comparison with its own previous incarnations.

The Verdict: Not bad, but the earlier volumes are much better. (KG)

Transmetropolitan: Spider's Thrash

By Warren Ellis, Darick Robertson and Rodney Ramos
Vertigo/Titan Books

As it moves into its final stages it's tempting to accuse **Transmetropolitan** of coasting, but that's really only because whenever Warren Ellis takes time to concentrate on the plot crescendo, he's obviously going to have less to spare for the satirical savagery that made this book famous. Luckily **Spider's Thrash** really is (with apologies for the ugly sporting metaphor) a game of two halves - the first three issues built largely around plot (Spider takes his column underground and vows to take down the Tony Blair-ish President Callahan before his time runs out) while the last three return to confronting the horror of a future society only seconds ahead of our own. Most disturbing of all is the story *Business*, an uncompromising look at child prostitution that is among the best things Ellis has ever written. As always, it's Spider Jerusalem's job to show us the horror, then hold our head and pin back our eyelids to stop us looking away.



The Verdict: A slow, plot-led beginning gives way to truly disturbing social horror. (RH)

What A Long Strange Strip It's Been

By Keith Knight
Top Shelf

The third collection of Keith Knight's newspaper strip - available online each week at *www.salon.com* - offers, well, more of the same. Knight knows what he's doing, he doesn't really vary his formula and repertory a great deal, and there's no need for him to do so. Each page contains an artfully combined mix of personal viewpoint, cultural and political comment, and quick, easy laughs. Even when the material is serious there'll always be at least a "plop" - a pratfall, physical or emotional, in the final panel - to put a wry smile on the reader's face.

The result is impressive, but has to be taken in small doses. Elegance and simplicity are rarely hallmarks of Knight's style - gangly caricatures generally compete with masses of words for space in his small, packed panels, to a rather more literary than artistic effect. Too much of it one go, and you're likely to find yourself screaming for something that looks different. In weekly doses, of course, that's hardly a matter for concern, but it's definitely advisable to read a collection like this sparingly.

And you should read it, if only to enjoy the skill with which Knight handles Black issues and politics. A black man himself, time and again confronts the issue of racism with the proposition that cultural links between people are more important than arbitrary divisions based on skin colour. That proposition is almost never articulated in these strips, yet the combination of personal anecdote and broader commentary places it on every page, adding up to a celebration not of race but of humanity. It's an impressive achievement.

The Verdict: A witty, stimulating and highly enjoyable piece of work so long as you read it a few pages at a time. (MK)

ZINE SEEN

The Mice in Cat Food

(Enquiries to Roger Mason, rogermason@virgin.net)

Do alien food canning factories have a problem with mice? That is the question Roger Mason poses in this SF adventure romp. The mice in question are a plucky band of humans who infest the alien canning factory at Station Nine, surviving all the factory management's attempts to wipe them out. Not only that, but the mice manage to embarrass the same management in front of their corporate bosses as well as the health and safety officials. As with all the best SF, the setting, a canning plant, is very familiar, but that now we are the vermin in someone else's food factory gives it an edge of weirdness. It's not important how the humans got there, whether they have been shrunk or if the aliens are just really big, what is important is that it's fun – and this action adventure tale with cartoon sensibilities and satirical underbite is definitely that.

The Verdict: A fun-filled, action-packed tale of men as mice. This is small press comics at its best. (RC)

Nucomix #8

(£1.50 including P+P from Simon Bowland, 7 Waterside Close, Madeley, Cheshire CW3 9TH)

Only the Brits seem to have a penchant for A3 folded photocopied stripzines now. Even small press publishers in developing countries are investing in slicker designs, comics formats and better print quality. Small press on the continent is almost a misnomer. Yes, it might have a smaller print run or be produced by the amateur rather than the professional, but it shares a common theme - quality.

Now, Nucomix doesn't lack quality. Cover artist Steve Ince is a shoe-in for work on Archie, Bongo or DC's Warner Bros line. Rik Hoskin can write reasonably solid dialogue even if he can't spell his own name. And Thomas Crielly and Simon Ecob show signs of "having a clue" and obviously want to work for a superhero publisher. But some of the people involved, specifically Simon Bowland, John Doran and Nick Taylor, need to learn something about storytelling. One can't script, one can't draw and one can do neither.

I admire the blind optimism of Bowland. He truly believes he's producing something akin to Stan's early days at Marvel, he's obviously proud of his achievement and the fact that he's coming out on a regular basis is certainly admirable. His editorial,

while lacking in tabulation, is full of Stan the Man - "Can you possibly spend £1.50 more wisely?" he concludes. The problem is, he seems so hyped up (also check out the website at www.nucomix.co.uk) and in love with the concept of **Nucomix** that he applies little or no quality control. This may not apply to everyone else, but if I had to I could think of a lot of things I could more wisely spend my £1.50 on.

The Verdict: A mixed bag across the board, really. We could be looking at some of the next generation of comics creators, but the odds are we're not. (DRB)

Shtumm #1

(£1, $2 or 2 Euros from Andy/Dachshund, PO Box 8892, London SW15, England)

An anthology of wordless strips, as you might have guessed from the title! Wordless comics can be challenging to read:

although the scope for the kind of movie-style dramatics found in mainstream comics is obviously limited by the absence of verbal text, the "silent" strip may offer a more personal kind of drama, one in which the smallest inflections count. And those inflections, unless they are highly exaggerated, must be read with some awareness of how the icons used in line drawing work. Concentration is needed, and perhaps a great deal of cross-cultural awareness. I wonder how many of the strips in **Shtumm** would be comprehensible to a Japanese audience?

All of which is to say that this comic offers a great deal of pleasure and reward to those that are prepared to work at it. The easier moments are supplied by a series of "Aegri Somnia", short and surreal dream strips constructed in the manner of a game of Consequences by Andy and various luminaries including Pat Moriarity, Terry Wiley, James Kochalka, Carol Swain and Andy Roberts. Such narratives are inevitably randomised; whether there is sense or no sense in them is largely the reader's choice.

Of the longer narratives, those recounting encounters and conflicts between Andy's familiar, dumpy "konky kru" creatures require the most care and concentration, and their use of the tiniest of variations in gesture, expression and body language rewards that concentration with many a smile. Simpler and very attractive longer narratives are provided by others, notably Ulf K., but perhaps the most pleasing strips herein are Andy's own Bilderbogen – not copies of the 19th century German caricature sheets after which they are named, but influenced by them and translating that influence into elegant, beautifully drawn humorous episodes.

The Verdict: A highly satisfying experience. (MK)

Skinned Rabbit #1

Kids Next-Door Publishing (Available for £2 from 13A, Commercial Road, Southampton SO15 1GF, England, or email horror81@yahoo.co.uk)

This is the comic book equivalent of Sam Raimi and his college buddies running around the local woods with a film camera strapped to the end of a broomstick. *The Evil Dead* meets *Watership Down*, except that these rabbits don't slope off over the horizon when things get tough, they grab axes and start swinging.

In summary, two rabbits - killed and destined for the pot - are returned to life and wreak their revenge on the Evil Farmer who, in turn, returns to wreak his revenge on the rabbits, who... What can I say; it made me laugh.

Alex Bradshaw's art is very good, with an excellently cartoonish quality to the rabbits that makes you laugh just to look at them; they really are beautifully expressive. The cover, particularly, is finely rendered, with the softer pencil lines left in to counterpoint the dark ink accents, making for an illustration that, while sketchy, has a great deal of depth and solidity.

The Verdict: Skinned Rabbit **is gross and funny and, in the nicest way, very silly. And it's way better than *Night of the Lepus*. (AC)**

WEB COMICS ... WEB COMICS ...

www.nelson-evergreen.com

This is the homepage for new upcoming comics talent, Nelson Evergreen. Vivid colours on the main page beckon the reader to the equally vivid and slightly disturbing Splatman - the superheroic adventures of a phlegmy old man as seen through the eyes of the local primary school kids. In addition to this there is the rather bemusing readers' Vikings pin-up section (all the pictures of skinny Vikings in their Y-fronts you could ever want). But the highlights for me are the collaborative comics pages, a repository for short strip collaborations between Evergreen and a number of different writers (and yes, I am one of them - why do you think I'm writing this review, sheesh). Ranging from a musical horror story to an ultrahip tale from "da street" and unromantic comedy, each strip shows off a different lick of his comic chops. There's something here for everyone. This could very well be the birth of comics' latest big talent.

The Verdict: A great little site packed, with strips and artwork that will make you want to come back for more. (RC)

THE VERDICT

CLASSIC TRADE PAPERBACK

Tellos: Reluctant Heroes

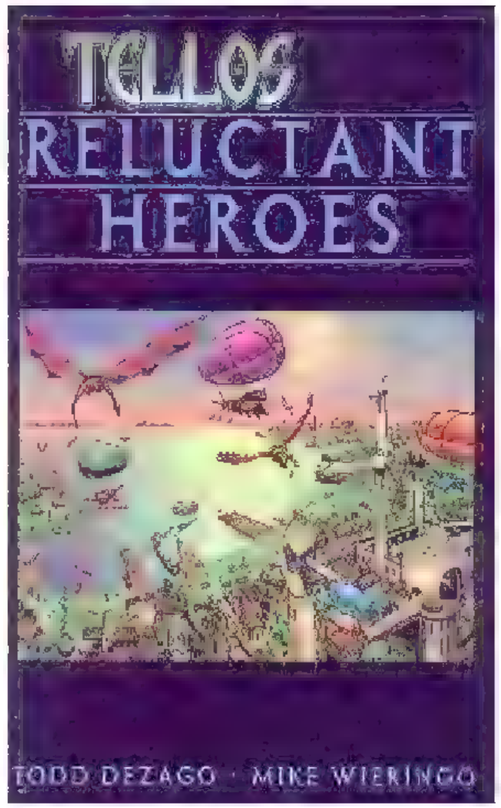
By Todd DeZago & Mike Wieringo

Image

I was disappointed. I'd expected to hate this and by the end I was feeling let down. It was *good*, but...

I thought trade paperbacks were designed to be like stories, in one hit. They shouldn't end with cliffhangers. More importantly they shouldn't end with stories that should be at the front - of the two back up features, the first one should have been the prologue, the second is perfect. Still, I thoroughly enjoyed this and that is why I ended up being totally disappointed by the way the entire package was put together.

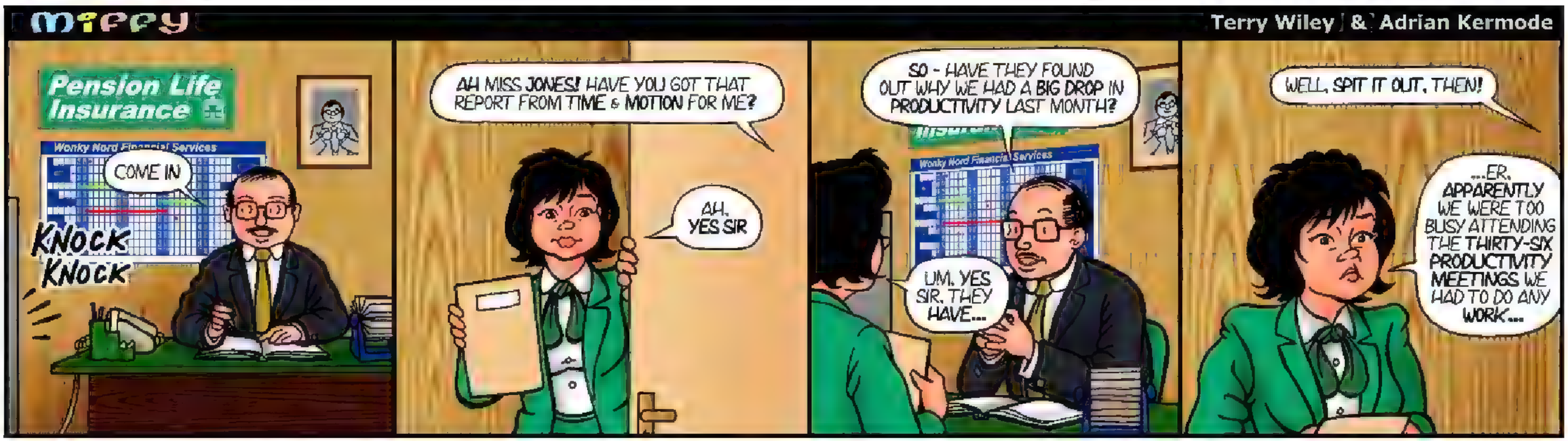
When you pay five cents short of $18 you expect something substantial for your money. One would believe that the company publishing the book would ensure that as well as having a quality product, it's packaged with care and attention. DC used to have Bob Rozakis doing this but he made a mistake and now DC has a mixed bag of trade paperback products and presentation of said products. Don't get me started on Marvel trades, there's just something tacky about them.



Tellos: understated but stylish cover; good quality interior paper (the cover could have been finer quality stock) and a nice design in the preface pages. You go into the story and are caught up in a rollicking good screenplay with hints of familiarity (in the ideas and supporting cast, not the comic); the pace is superb and there are great moments of clever storytelling. The one in particular that works for me is what happens between issues #3 and #5 and is the kind of thing you want to see in a lot of comics nowadays the impression that the writer is taking his audience seriously. He is working in unison with his artist and they are working together to produce something with a personality.

Tellos is a mixture of Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings, the Little Grey Men and Douglas Fairbanks or Burt Lancaster swashbuckling pirate movies. It features the things that comics fans like and it has characters that could appeal to non-comics fans. It also has a distinctly European feel to it. It actually draws you more into it the further you go. You get impressed by the writer's ability to keep the momentum going and then... it ends?? You seem to be reaching a point in the story where you might just start to understand how it all fits together and it stops and ends on a cliffhanger. What a stupid way to try and entice non-comics fans back. They won't want to rush out to a comic shop and buy Part Two, Image. They'll stomp around their houses, grumbling, groaning and calling Image a bunch of capitalist pigs and they wouldn't be wrong. This is a real shame. Even as a comics fan I actually don't want to go in search of Kindred Spirits, the second book, because I feel that I've been cheated. It's annoying because this actually is otherwise a good collection with a tight script and excellent artwork.

The Verdict: If you've got money to give to Image then this series may be a great investment, but if you re watching your pennies then this is a bit of a cheat. (DRB)


Mippy
Terry Wiley & Adrian Kermode
Pension Life Insurance
Wonky Nord Financial Services
COME IN
KNOCK KNOCK
AH MISS JONES! HAVE YOU GOT THAT REPORT FROM TIME & MOTION FOR ME?
AH, YES SIR
SO - HAVE THEY FOUND OUT WHY WE HAD A BIG DROP IN PRODUCTIVITY LAST MONTH?
UM, YES SIR, THEY HAVE...
WELL, SPIT IT OUT, THEN!
...ER, APPARENTLY WE WERE TOO BUSY ATTENDING THE THIRTY-SIX PRODUCTIVITY MEETINGS WE HAD TO DO ANY WORK...

EASTERN PROMISE

Kevin Hill receives some spam and another column is born...

Everyone Can Draw Manga

CONTROVERSY time.
While I was putting together last issue's column an email was forwarded to me, containing a link to an online press pack advertising a new comic, of which the creators are quite understandably proud. I could, if I was feeling particularly spiteful, name this comic and its creators - but I'm not going to, since shooting down a new comic without reading at least an issue would be wrong. For all I know, it could turn out to be one of the greatest comics ever released. Besides which, it's a new enterprise, and shooting down small publishers, or their product, isn't a sensible idea because new talent to grace the likes of DC, Marvel, Image and Oni often starts out in the small press. I'm actually hoping that the publisher and creators of this comic don't work out it's their comic I'm referring to, as I wish them all the best - but now I'm starting to head away from my point.

The reason for this email being forwarded was that the publishers had used the word manga. That's it, pure and simple - the assumption was then made that, since it mentioned manga, there was a chance I would be interested in it. Now, I do like a bit of manga, as you'll have gathered over the past year. Some think all I ever read are Japanese comics, something the reviews section of **Borderline** will hopefully quash, to a degree.

When you think about it, however, you begin to realise how much the term "manga" has become ingrained within the US comics industry, and possibly in English comics as a whole - this could also be true of other industries throughout the world, barring Japan obviously. In fact, the term has been somewhat modified, often to mean just the artwork but rarely referring to the manner in which comics are produced in Japan.

So we've subverted the term in order to provide a description of a style of art that is becoming prevalent within the US comics industry. Normally we equate a style with a particular artist: Jack Kirby, Jean "Moebius" Giraud, Jim Lee, and Alex Toth all have fairly unique styles that other art has often been compared with. For artists inspired by Japanese comic artists, there is only one description - so rather than people saying that their artwork looks like that of Katsuhiro Otomo, Osamu Tezuka or even Masamune Shirow, they are described as having a "manga style" or are "manga-influenced".

The style to which these comments refer is that of large eyes, and noses that are either pointed or almost ignored - and usually those traits are accompanied by slender, almost androgynous, figures. This does a disservice to variety of styles found within Japan, and gives Westerners the impression that this is all Japanese comics are about (even though a look at the Japanese artists I listed will show you three distinct styles). Adding to the list of distinct styles is easy; of those artists whose work has been translated and released in the West, few share styles – in fact, you'd be fairly hard pressed to find two styles that match, as you would in US comics as a whole.

It's a statement none of us like to hear, as it reduces our beloved comics to a stereotype of tights, underwear and capes - ignoring the sheer variety of styles that can be found, even at just a company such as Marvel.

It's impossible to deny that there are certain overall characteristics, but American superhero comic artists also embodied particular characteristics within the genre, such as the ways muscles or faces are drawn. Artists such as Eisner, Kirby and Romita Sr. have all made contributions to America's prevalent style, and even Jim Lee's work echoed that approach, but added more weight to the characters.

While the character designs can often be viewed as simplistic, and in many ways unrealistic, Japanese comics do tend to excel in anything non-character - from backgrounds to vehicles and on to… erm… giant robots. If you flip through a book such as **Akira**, it doesn't take long to notice how detailed many of the backgrounds are. While the US comics industry has welcomed Japanese character design into its heart, it appears that it has left behind the technical skills. Obviously, there are exceptions - and I know I'll be hauled over the coals for this statement - but the majority of work that has been tagged with the term "manga" shares none of this technical expertise, with backgrounds either sparse, non-existent, or in a simplistic form that echoes the character design.

Nobody is to blame. It's easy to understand why the character design has been the main artistic style to cross over, but some of the more endearing things about Japanese comics are the contrasting characters and backgrounds - it actually helps make the characters stand out that much more. Still, it does make you question the validity of using the term "manga" in relation to Western artists. A harsh view could be taken - are these artists merely lazy, and so have copied the simplistic type of character designs?

That would probably be unfair, for the most part. Using the term

"fake-manga" is also incorrect - surely, if it were fake, then it would bear an uncanny resemblance to the item which it attempts to "counterfeit". But influences are influences, and so we shouldn't really judge these people by their influences - but we also shouldn't necessarily place them *alongside* their influences.

A further examination of Japanese comics makes this US "manga" categorisation seem even more curious. Unlike many Western comics, Japanese comics appear in weekly and monthly anthologies. With a weekly schedule, and weekly page counts for each story being higher than – say – those of the UK's **2000AD**, the writers and artists are under an incredible pressure to deliver. While this usually results in sub-standard storytelling, the constant pressure has also produced writers and artists capable of surviving such deadlines.

A by-product of this has been the studio system. Aspiring artists, in particular, often begin their careers as assistants, helping with chores such as backgrounds or application of shades, with the lead artist providing either just the pencils, or doing full duties on the characters. This system allows for the production of a large volume of work. Eventually, hopefully, the assistants begin to produce their own work, and can then go on to form a studio of their own. (This is analogous to the packaging shops which thrived in the USA during the 1940s, but declined when the volume of comics production and demand dropped during the 1950s.)

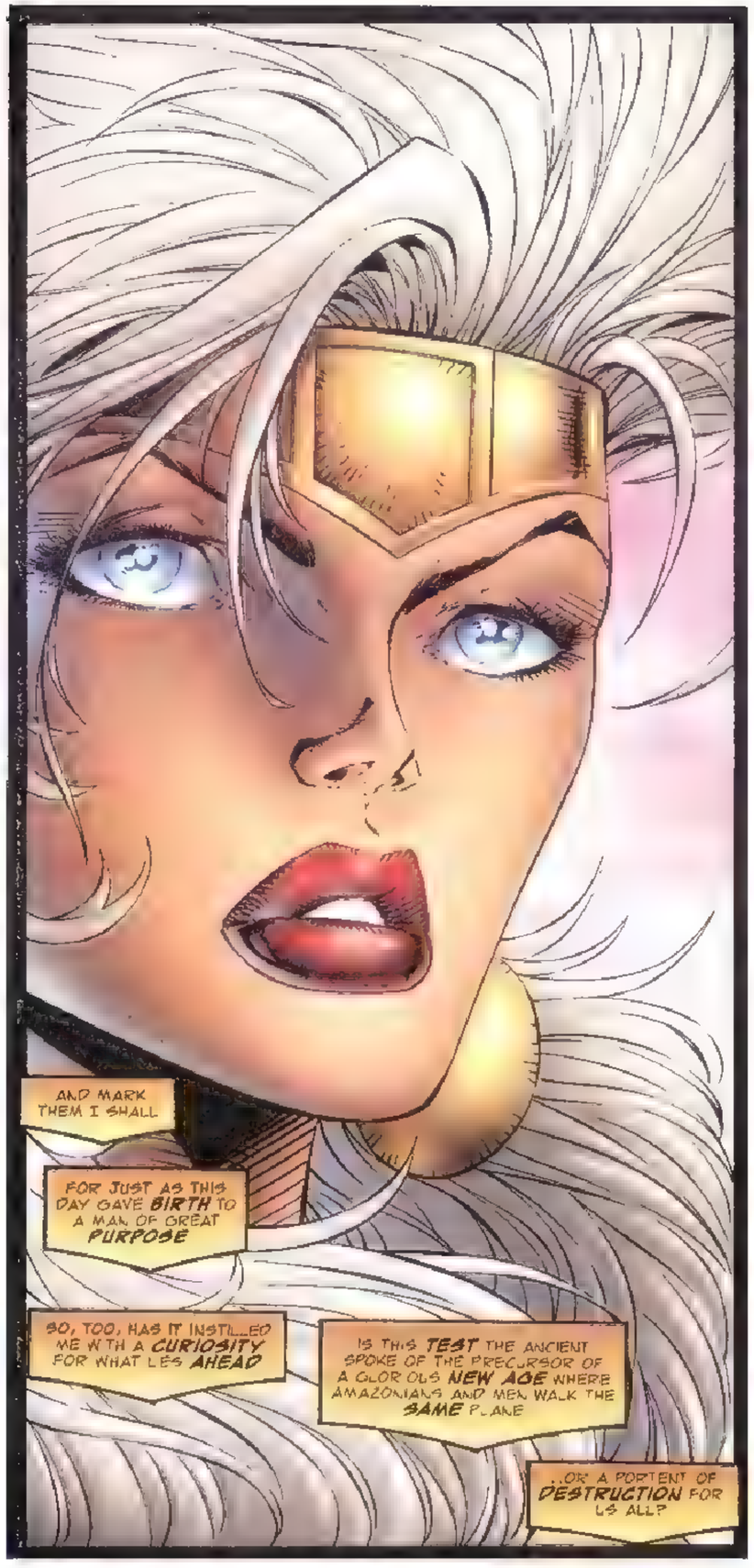
The studio system not only provides comics at volume, it also paves the way for new talent to emerge. While it can be as difficult to become a writer or artist in Japan as it is in America, the studio system allows for a foot in the door – something many Western creators would like to have.

The disparities between the Japanese and US comics industries are vast – gulf-like – and yet we're still clinging to this notion that comics equivalent to Japanese ones exist inside the US industry. It would be nice if this were correct, but when it comes to creators influenced by Japanese comics, sadly it isn't.

But you should still think about the disdain with which we greet comments such as "in a comic book style" – a catch-all comment levelled at comics by people who have likely never seen past Superman, Batman or Spider-Man. It's a statement none of us like to hear, as it reduces our beloved comics to a stereotype of tights, underwear and capes – ignoring the sheer variety of styles that can be found, even at just a company such as Marvel.

I told you this would be controversial. It shouldn't be, but it is. You may be offended, disgusted, question who the hell I think I am. But I'm trying to make a point – however badly.

No, the US comics industry isn't producing any manga. It's not really producing many comics that share all their characteristics with Japanese comics. Instead, and this is the really, really important thing: it's producing something new. Calling it "manga" might just be unfair.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IS THIS TEST THE ANCIENT SPOKE OF THE PRECURSOR OF A GLORIOUS NEW AGE WHERE AMAZONIANS AND MEN WALK THE SAME PLANE
..OR A PORTENT OF DESTRUCTION FOR US ALL?

Illustrations: Previous page - Bad "manga" influence? This page - Or a whole new art style?

BORDERLINE VOL #1 CDS

Would you like a complete set of **Borderline**?
The first 17 regular issues, the Manhattan Projects Special, and a special bonus Borderline feature?
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How much is it going to cost?
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All cheques and IMOs should be made payable to ***Borderline Media Ltd*** and please allow at least 28 days for delivery.
All enquiries to the editorial address on page 2.
Contact *squonk_uk@yahoo.com* for payment details!

MAN ON A MISSION

Picking up from where he left off last month, Martin Shipp decides to call the comics industry's pint a poof and ask it if it wants to go outside, now.

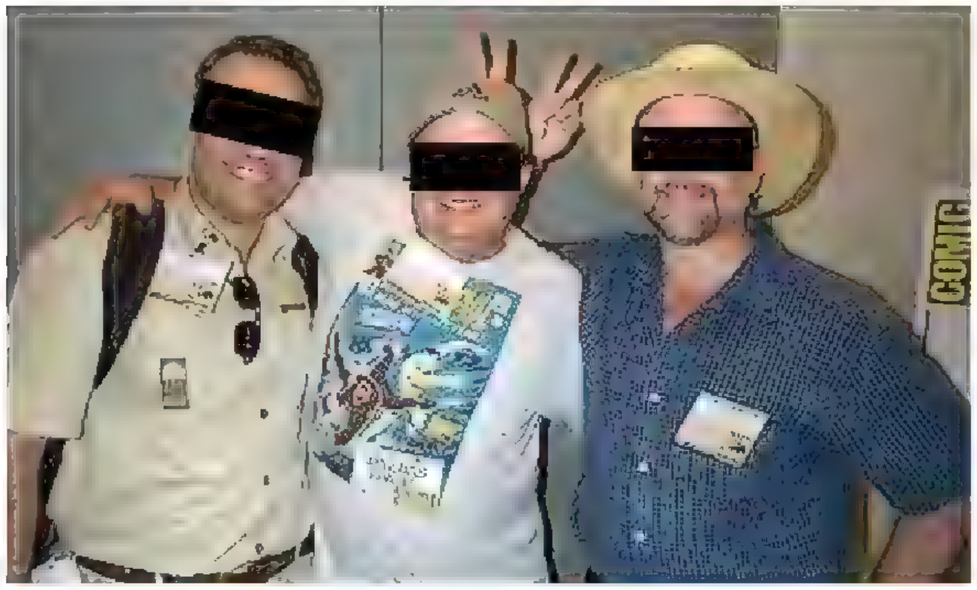
The Smurfs? Huh? Yeah, the one on the left has told the one opposite that his pint's a poof and now he's waiting to be taken outside. Unfortunately for him, the other Smurf, posing as the comics industry, is far too pissed (drunk) to have a problem...

AS it usually is, it's all your fault.

Maybe not You, sitting reading this and wondering where the time goes and why, but certainly the all-encompassing universal generic *You*. It's You that's kept superheroes as the dominant genre within the English-speaking Western world, it's you who doesn't accept anything other than the standard format for the medium, it's just… You. The Fifth Horseman. Apathy, conservatism, sloth, knowing what it likes and not caring for anything other, thank you kindly. I take a deep breath and let it out very slowly.

There's a biological phenomenon wherein a group of women, if in close proximity to each other for an extended length of time, will find their menstrual cycles begin to synchronise (and many thanks to the fellow contributor - you know who you are - who reminded me of this). In an uncanny echo of this, we often find that the contributors to **Borderline** deal with roughly similar subjects almost every month; last month and this we've mostly been exercised with trade paperbacks and graphic novels.

Now then: last issue I said that if a story works better as a collection, there's no real need to publish it in serial form. I stand by that. The question this month is: Why are there not more new original graphic novels? Here's why: You don't buy them. You don't buy them because they're too expensive. They're too expensive because the publisher has to cover the costs inherent in a small print run. The print run is small because the publisher really doesn't expect to sell that many because the price is high because you don't buy them.



Are you Cool?

So what can we do about that? Ideally, we'd set up a world wide political ideology, acceptable to all regardless of their current stripe, wherein comics were so popular they'd be subsidised until they were cheap enough that they'd almost be given away. As we can't do that, and as nobody in their right mind would expect anybody to give up the basic essentials such as food and shelter just to buy comics, we'll have to come up with something workable. How about: we start a viral guerilla marketing campaign with the purpose of making comics acceptable, not to the mainstream, but to the terminally trendy and hip. Face it, if someone needs so desperately to stay in front of the pack that they'll happily drop a couple of hundred for a pair of trousers, they'll happily do the same for a large-format glossy-paper hardback - if doing so is a signifier of pack-leader alpha-male (or female) cool.

This will have to be a group effort, obviously. Some of you will have to do the legwork involved in making The Comics a desirable thing: flyposting, stickering, being seen in all the right bars with a copy of that little *something* tucked under your arm or poking shyly from your jacket pocket. More importantly than that, though, the majority of you will have to make something of a sacrifice.

It's a fact that as soon as a thing filters down through the cultural consciousness, from the leaders to the hoi polloi, it loses its totemic power and becomes inert. Eventually, it becomes less than inert: it becomes respectable. Next thing you know it's having drinks with Tony and Cherie at Number Ten. Therefore we must delay the cultural trickle-down for as long as possible. To do this, we must prevent the ordinary folk from being seen with comics.

Take a good look at yourself. Now ask, and answer as truthfully as possible: Am I Cool? It's quite likely you're not. If you're not Cool, I have to ask you right here right now to stop reading comics. It's for their own good, and in the long run it's for your own good as well. Leave them to the elite for a while. Let the beautiful people have comics for a short while; let them place comics on the Pedestal of Art, alongside the unmade beds and the neon expletives.

I know you're not happy about this: but give it a year or so and see what happens. Comics will, after exposure in the top mags and papers and TV programmes, seep into the mass consciousness and become as popular as that cheese you can get in a can. And then, my followers? Then we will have comics in every bookstore in the land, comics bought in volume by everybody from your bank manager to the man who does the drains, comics at low prices brought about by true mass production, comics by new and exciting creators hypnotised by the glamour and excitement the medium will have.

Are you with me? Then together – to Utopia!

Martin Shipp will be well enough to receive visitors very soon.

JOANNA KARPOWICZ

JOANNA KARPOWICZ was born in 1976 in Cracow, Poland, and attended the High School of Fine Arts in Cracow. In 1996 she graduated and continued her education in the Painting Department at the Cracovian Academy of Fine Arts, which is considered to be the best of its kind in Poland. She passed her exams with the highest score in her class, achieving the first position on the list.

The Cracovian Academy of Fine Arts represents a very traditional, conservative kind of art education. The Painting Department is rather more orientated towards studying nature and life drawing than towards experimentation - so, in a way, it has determined Joanna's education and approach. "Comics" is a forbidden word at the Academy – the line taken is that comics "is not an art and cannot be one".

Painting nude models or still lifes in the Academy *atelier* was not enough for Joanna. She started to paint her own themes and motifs: cars, motorways, drive-ins, trains, everything connected with our modern everyday reality. Her individualism expresses itself in her painting - her pictures were not "academic" and this occasionally led to much controversy, since the "comics way " of seeing the world around us was not very welcome in the Academy's conservative environment. Fortunately, after her second year there Joanna's professors agreed to allow her an individual course of study. She painted a lot, developing her own style. In 2001 she received a diploma with distinction. Her diploma exhibition was titled "The Journey with many stops" - and it presented various motifs from Poland.

After finishing her studies, Joanna avoided contact with the fine art world, preferring to work alone at home - she didn't even exhibit her work. She focused on a graphic novel project, The Dog Tale, from which we are delighted to present extracts in these pages. She also began to paint "comic pictures" - comic scenes on traditional canvas. Joanna expresses herself via many very different techniques, but for the most part her works are painted with acrylic on canvas. In this traditional way she creates very genuine and attractive pictures.

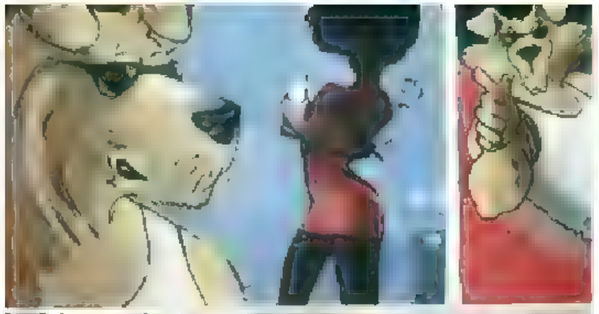
Joanna works as a freelancer in various advertising agencies, producing illustrations, target-oriented projects and designs for characters connected with the promotion of different products. She works from home, via the Internet, which allows her the time to work on her own projects as well. These were not shown to the public at all until October 2002, when she took her portfolio with her to the XIII International Comic Festival in Lodz, Poland and decided to show it to professionals there.

Then everything began to move. Joanna's work came as a big surprise to editors and other artists, because until then she had been completely unknown. She received some very interesting offers, and is now she working on three projects (including Szminka (Lipstick), a graphic novel project scriped by Lodz 2002 prizewinner Jerzy Szylak: at least two projects are planned for publication in 2003.

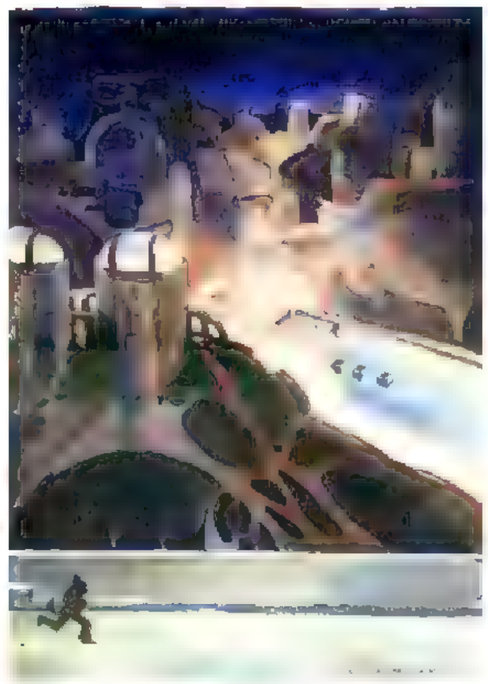
This 26 year old artist is now beginning to make her way into the comic industry - but her works already represent a unique style and artistic maturity. Joanna still avoids the "outer world", contacting it via email only, but she understands that her work has to be exhibited. She has chosen the Internet as a way of communication – *http://www.kolory.pl* contains a Joanna Karpowicz gallery, including sketches, concept art and examples of other works. You'll also find there Joanna's presentation of full colour works by some of her young artist friends - Rafal Szlapa, Joanna Holeksa-Szlapa, Dagmara Matuszak and others. The website, although it already contains many examples of Joanna's work, is still under construction - to see it in its true colours, check it out at Christmas.

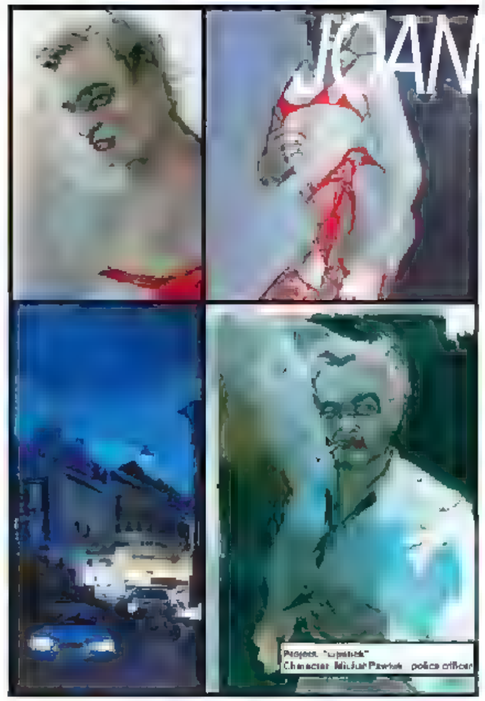
Text prepared in conjunction with Darek Szalaty, darek@kolory.pl

YOUNG GUNS

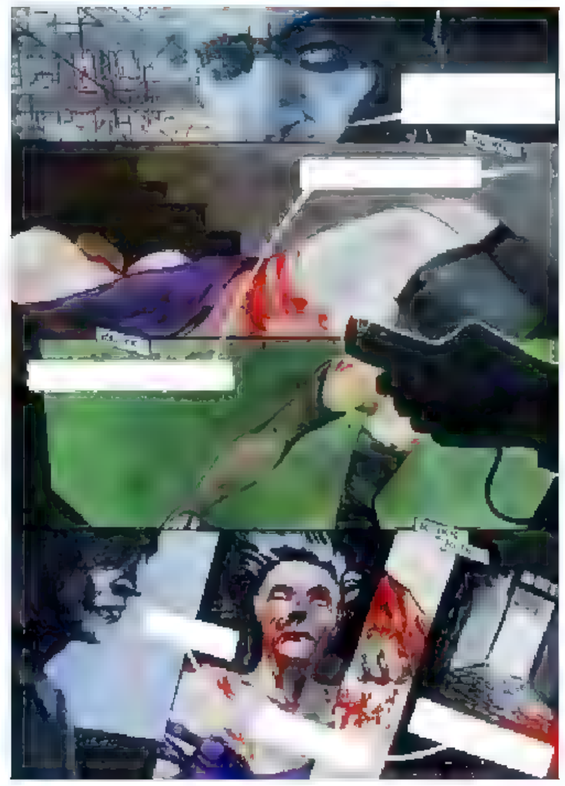


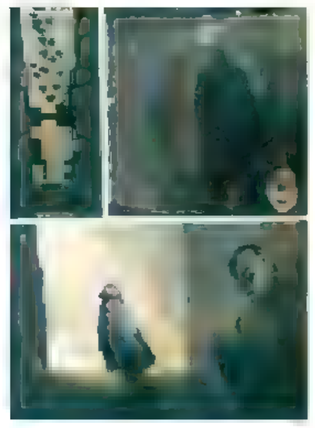
OINK!
OINK!

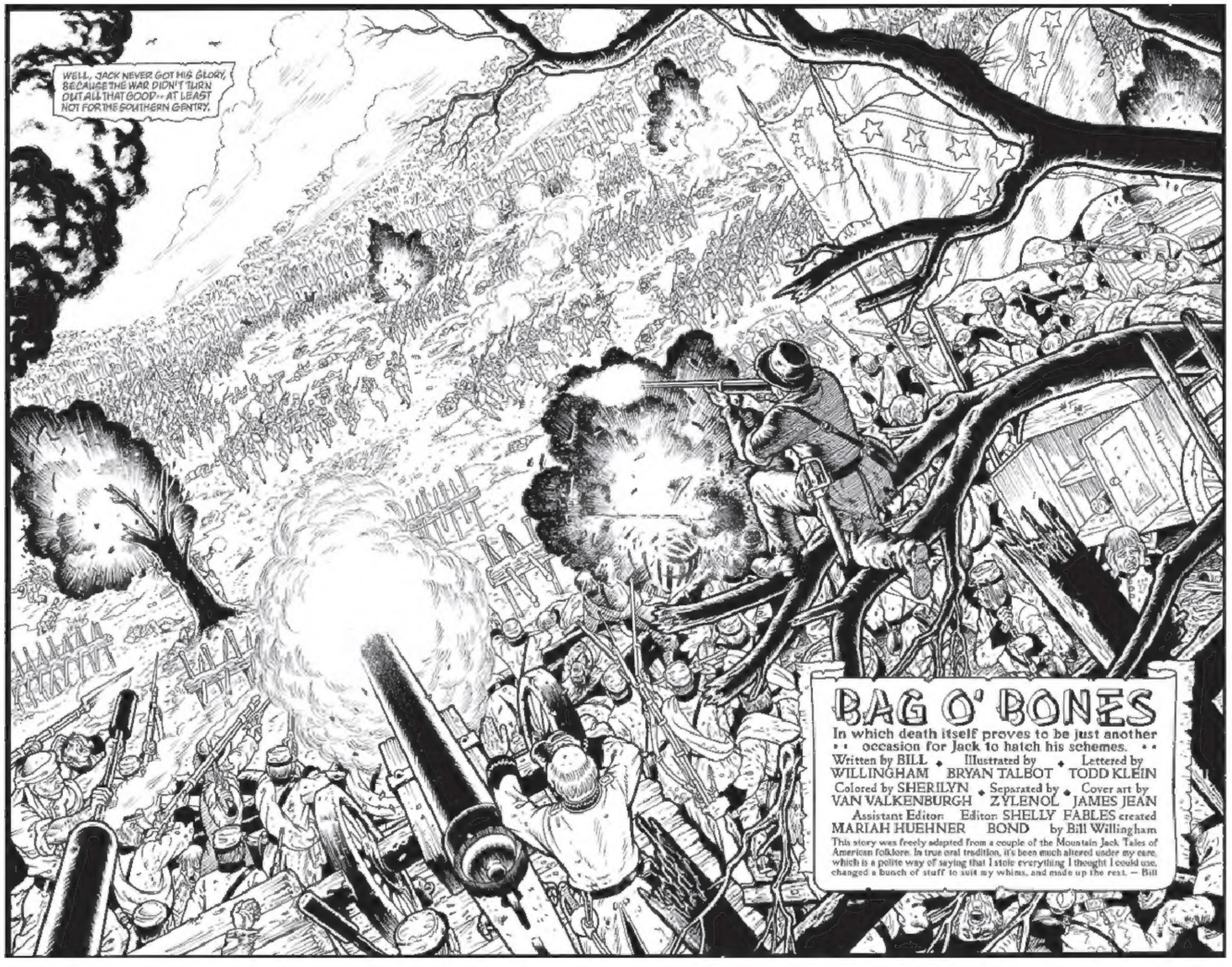




JOANNA KARPOWICZ






WELL, JACK NEVER GOT HIS GLORY, BECAUSE THE WAR DIDN'T TURN OUT ALL THAT GOOD -- AT LEAST NOT FOR THE SOUTHERN GENTRY.
BAG O' BONES
In which death itself proves to be just another occasion for Jack to hatch his schemes.
Written by BILL WILLINGHAM
Illustrated by BRYAN TALBOT
Lettered by TODD KLEIN
Colored by SHERILYN VAN VALKENBURGH
Separated by ZYLENOL
Cover art by JAMES JEAN
Assistant Editor: MARIAH HUEHNER
Editor: SHELLY BOND
FABLES created by Bill Willingham
This story was freely adapted from a couple of the Mountain Jack Tales of American folklore. In true oral tradition, it's been much altered under my care, which is a polite way of saying that I stole everything I thought I could use, changed a bunch of stuff to suit my whims, and made up the rest. -- Bill

FUN WITH FABLES

Bill Willingham's Vertigo title ***Fables*** *– an intricate and intelligent workout on how the famous characters from traditional fairy tales might be getting along in the modern world – has been garnering some very positive reactions. So when we saw some of Bryan Talbot's, ahem, fabulous art for the fill-in eleventh issue (due for release in March 2003) we thought you'd like to see it too.* ***Borderline****'s Mike Kidson asked Bryan if he had any comments about his involvement in the series...*

Borderline: *How did you come to be drawing* ***Fables*** *#11; interest on your part, Bill's request, editorial suggestion?*

Bryan Talbot: It was an accident! I'd written a proposal, at DC's request, for a new **Dead Boy Detectives** miniseries. It was a really great storyline too - bags of humour, excitement and pyrotechnics - then the plug was pulled after Vertigo decided to cut down on the **Sandman** spin-offs, leaving me with a deck I'd cleared so I could script the thing and no other work lined up. Kindly, Vertigo immediately supplied me with the art chores for **Fables** #11 so that I had something to be working on. Shelly Roeberg chose this particular issue because she knew it would really suit me - and it did! It's a terrific script by Bill, a great read, full of folklorey resonance, and is also out of the regular continuity, a stand alone issue set during the American Civil War.

BL*: I know you've worked with plenty of scripters in the past - Pat Mills, Neil Gaiman, Tom Veitch and many more - but I think I'm correct that it's been a while since you did that? So how's it going, working with Bill?*

BT: Pretty straightforward, he's a very nice guy. He even phoned a couple of times to tell me how much he liked the pages I was producing. Usually when I work for hire I just do the pencils. I inked this one too, so it's much closer to my "personal" stuff.

BL*: And are you having fun with the* ***Fables*** *material? I'd have thought it'd be just your kind of thing...* ☺

BT: Hey! Historical battles, bayou swamps, the Devil, the Grim Reaper, zombies and a raunchy nude sex scene with a gorgeous Southern Belle? What do you think? ☺

BL*: Finally, do you have anything else in the pipeline that you can talk about?*

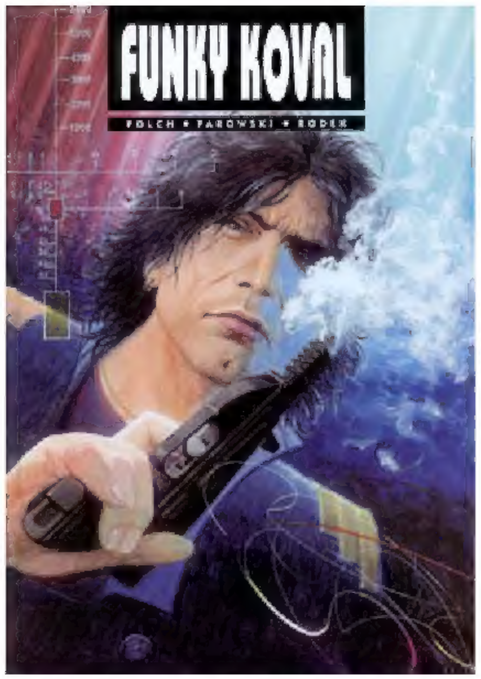
BT: I've spent the last few months heavily researching and writing a new graphic novel that's totally unlike anything else I've done...in fact, totally unlike anything else, period. So much so that I don't know whether I'm bravely pushing back the boundaries of what you can do with comics or I'm foolishly building a scaffold from which to commit professional suicide. I'm just about to sign with a publisher, but until that's done (should be in a week or two) I can't really talk about it.

On the other hand, I've just drawn and computer-coloured one of the special back page *Real Life Rock Tales* comic features for the big selling US Rock magazine *Spin*. The strip features a weird childhood story by Nick Cave of Bad Seeds fame. Out in January.

WE WERE KILLED IN THE BATTLE THIS MORNING, JACK, BUT WE CAN'T DIE.
WHY HAVE YOU KEPT US FROM GOING TO OUR REWARD?
WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?

CONVENTION REPORT

THE INTERNATIONAL COMIC FESTIVAL OF LODZ 2002



Jarek Obwazanek gives an appreciative account of Poland's biggest convention...

POLAND's biggest comic festival was held in Lodz from October 4-6. The festival, housed in the cultural centre of the city of Lodz, attracted almost 2,000 visitors. That's a lot of people, if you keep in mind that Poland's comic scene is still quite small. A big disappointment this year was the lack of sponsors, which caused the organisers financial problems *[one of the reasons the* ***Borderline*** *team couldn't make it this time!]*.

FRIDAY, THE FIRST DAY OF THE FESTIVAL

The opening of the comics' exhibitions took place, and there was a very good party at a nightclub called Forum Fabricum situated - as is very common in Lodz - in an old factory warehouse. The highlight of the party was a concert with two popular groups - Baaba and Cool Kids of Death. Krzysztof Ostrowski, the lead singer and Jacek Fras, the drummer of CKOD, are both renowned comics illustrators. During this first day (and night) the jury of the festival was also busy doing the selection of prize winners.

In the exhibition galleries of the cultural centre, comics made by young illustrators from Poland and The Czech Republic were shown. The festival cafeteria held an exhibition of Danish comics.

SATURDAY, THE NAKED HEDGEHOG DAY

Saturday has always been the biggest day of the festival. There are the autograph sessions and public performances, with a large number of Polish creators but also with Poles working in the West: Grzegorz Rosinski and Kas. Naturally the most prominent stars of the festival were the creators of the older generation, but large crowds came to see and hear the "young guns" - Adler & Piatkowski, and Gawronkiewicz & Wojda (see **Borderline** #12 and #13). The moment everyone was waiting for was the announcement of the awards. Over 50 illustrators and scriptwriters had competed for the Grand Prix - and not only Polish creators but Czech and Israeli as well, while last year's festival had seen illustrators from the UK, Japan and US. The Grand Prix was awarded to Slawomir Kielbus. A big surprise was that some of the awards went to Jiri Grus, Milos Mazal and Tomas Kucerovsky from the Czech Republic (see **Borderline** #14).

Saturday evening saw another party at the Forum Fabricum. One amusing highlight was the selection of "The Illustrated Miss" of the festival. This has become a merry festival tradition - imagine a roaring (and drunken) crowd screaming their heads off as the judge reveals the candidates (the one that gets the most screams wins). Tomek Lesniak, illustrator of the **Jerry the Hedgehog** series, won the first prize with his drawing of a naked… hedgehog! That's Jerry's girlfriend, actually! The rest of the night was dancing, drinking, a concert and shoulder rubbing with Kas, Rosinski and the local stars.

Friends of Borderline autograph session - L-R Lesniak, Wojda, Gawronkiewicz

Far left: Funky Koval, while above is one of the art exhibits.

SUNDAY, THE HANGOVER DAY

Sunday brought - apart from a huge hangover - a special program for manga lovers and for the kids. Sunday is the day when you want to relax and check out the collector's bazaar. This year the bazaar was divided into two sections, one for the collectors' stuff and fanzines, and one for the big publishers. This was due to a large amount of new books being launched, both Polish and foreign. Freshly translated books from the USA, Japan and France are a sweet sight to a comic fan's eye. But the local albums, that's what most people wait for.

The young but successful publishing house of Mandragora presented two original Polish albums. **Mohair Dreams**, by

Krzysztof Gawronkiewicz and Dennis Wojda, is the second book in the series about the strange town of Mikropolis (see **Borderline** #13). **Golota vs. Predator**, by Robert Adler and Tobiasz Piatkowski is a brilliant parody of American crossover films, featuring the Polish boxer Golota and the Predator.

The publishing giant Egmont was also proud to present two Polish books. **Public enemy: Jerry the Hedgehog**, by Tomek Lesniak & Rafal Skarzycki, is the second book in the series with the famous dope smoking hedgehog. **Gail**, by Piotr Kowalski, is the third book in a science fiction epic. Egmont also prepared some reissues of classic Polish comics, such as **Orient Man** by Tadeusz

Baranowski and **Funky Koval** by Boguslaw Polch.

There were also a lot of launches by independent publishers. Worth mentioning are **Salute the Heroes** by Jerzy Ozga & Zeke - a parody of *Star Wars* and *Captain Kloss* (a Polish TV

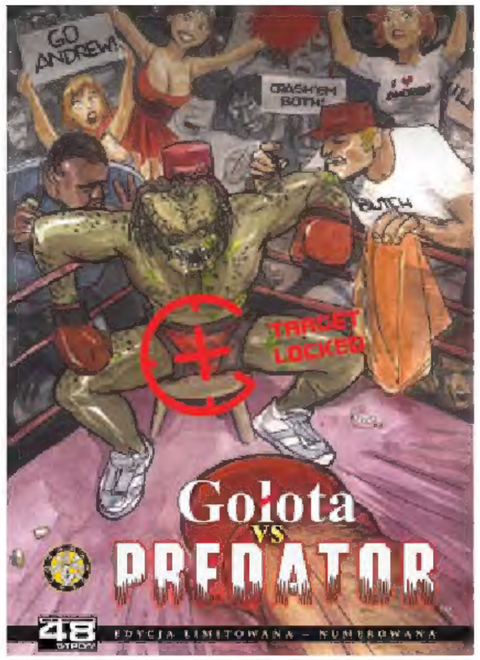
series and later comic about World War II) and **Happy Ending**, a collective tribute to police officer Captain Zbik, a cult classified comic hero from the Communist era (see **Borderline** #11). Particularly interesting were the debuts by two of Poland's youngest and most promising creators: **Doctor Bryan**, by Jakub Rebelka, and **Diefenbach**, by Benedykt Szneider.

When you see so many new comic launches during a few days it really feels like you're touching the sky. And it makes you long for the next great comic event: The Warsaw Comic Convention, a younger cousin of the Lodz festival. But that's not until the beginning of March. And there's a looong cold winter ahead of us…

MINIMAL BROS AT THE XIII INTERNATIONAL COMIC FESTIVAL IN LODZ

… while Magdalena Walusiak takes a more critical look at what wasn't so good about the Lodz Festival

THERE was a lot to complain about during the festival, starting with organisational chaos and an interruption by the Premier of Poland (he came to see a concert in the same building), and ending with the restrictive approach of the jury to the regulations of the contest.



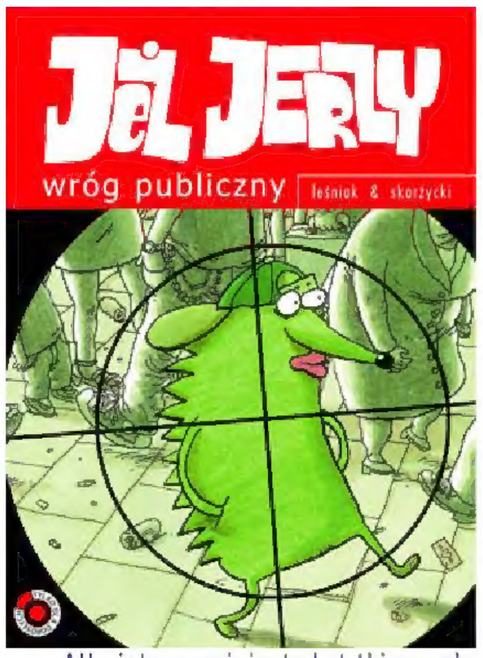
For the first time in the history of the festival, the organisers had decided to disqualify a large number of very interesting comics sent in "a bit" after the official deadline. The works of these latecomers were shown at the exhibition, but with yellow "disqualified" tags attached. Keeping this fact in mind, it's hard to understand the Jury

chairman Wojciech Birek's complaints about a low level of quality thresholds this year. His point about the big festivals abroad being very keen on keeping their deadlines didn't seem a good one, as the Lodz festival is losing its visitors and the organisation is chaotic, to say the least.

The bitterness of the excluded authors towards the jury was noticeable in the festival corridors, as it became obvious to that the jury makes its selection only one day before presenting its verdict. Given that, it was hard to understand the point of a strictly enforced deadline. This dispute was so hot it found its echo in the *eMeFKa NEWS* - the festival newspaper.

The charity auction - proceeds due to go to a children's hospital - held before the announcement of the Jury's verdict ended in a complete fiasco. An original comic signed by one of the "old masters" of Polish comics, Papcio Chmiel (opening bid 100PLN) and a t-shirt Papcio had to wear for one day (opening bid 200PLN) failed to find any buyers. The same happened with a drawing made by Zbigniew "Kas" Kasprzak (opening bid 400PLN). The only things bought during the whole auction were a signed pencil sketch by Grzegorz Rosinski (which went for 500PLN) and a drawing made by Tadeusz Baranowski (knocked down for 320PLN). The organisers claim they will sell the remaining items through an online auction - but when and where no one is able to say at this moment.

Magdalena Walusiak writes on behalf of the Polish cultural website Minimal Bros. - http://www.kultura.org.pl/



All pictures originated at this year's Lodz festival.

WORLD OF HEROS

Fourteen gallons of sputum, some diesel engine parts later and Gertrude's leg was broked... Chris "SC" Spicer.

DC AS INVENTIVE AS EVER

BIG news from DC's Retailer weekend, as the big D-to-the-C announced some of the original new titles that'll be rockin' your world over the coming year!

The company announced a host of brand new titles featuring imaginative characters and never before seen storylines. These will include groundbreaking comics such as **Batman**, **Superman** and **Wonder Woman** spin-offs, as well as revolutionary new teams such as **The Teen Titans**, **The Outsiders** and **The Authority**. With innovative new ideas like these, it's no wonder DC has such a reputation as a hotbed of creative talent!

Meanwhile, Vertigo maintains its place on the cutting edge of the industry by once again pushing the envelope into brave new frontiers of comic art. They're still doing what they do best - publishing the most pioneering, original comics out there, as evidenced in their 2003 line-up, including two new **Sandman** series and a miniseries starring **Sgt. Rock**! "It's Sgt. Rock like you've never seen him before!" a Vertigo spokesperson told us. "Well, he's still, you know, fighting in a war. And he'll still have Easy Company with him. But other than that, it's brand new and it's shocking stuff!"

Some of DC's innovative new characters

It's obvious from DC's 2003 line-up that the company isn't content to sit on its hands. With new comics featuring Aquaman, New Gods, Hawkman and a wealth of new and inspiring ideas, DC looks set to move forward… into the future!

"LICENSE" TO PRINT MONEY!

LICENSING is big news in the comics industry at the moment, with companies rushing to sign up the publishing rights to big-name brands such as **GI Joe** and **Transformers**. Following on from the success of these titles, and other licensed comics like **Battle Of The Planets** and **Thundercats**, DC have announced a new batch of retro-styled, toy-based comics which will be hitting the stores in the coming months. Hot new series include **Mr Potato Head**, in which the titular tuber struggles with both the threat of super-crime and the constant fear that his facial features will drop off, and **Hoop and Stick**, a hard-boiled *noir*-ish crime thriller about a detective agency run by the controversial partnership of a hoop, and a stick. These titles are

seen as a reaction to Marvel's recent announcement of **Sea Monkeys** #1, an action-packed superhero romp starring a team of ugly, freeze-dried, largely transparent shrimp-things.

Marvel have been the subject of other license-based news recently - this time concerning a movie based on one of their most enduring characters. The *Spider-Man* movie has proven incredibly popular, and this success has led to a reaffirmation of the ongoing, loving relationship between Marvel and Spider-Man's creator, Stan Lee.

Lee, the man who is solely responsible for creating Marvel's entire canon of superheroes and all the success they've experienced over the years, is one of the industry's best-loved figures, especially by such luminaries as Steve Ditko and the late Jack Kirby, who both have said that they owe their entire careers to the brilliance of the man who is single-handedly responsible for creating the medium of comics.

A close friend told us: "Stan keeps telling us how much he loves Marvel! He says that working with them is a complete pleasure; they always treat him with dignity and respect, and he tells me that they make him feel very valuable. He's looking forward to working closely with the company he built with his own two hands and that he loves like a son for years to come."

Marvel were equally gushing in their praise. "The *Spider-Man* movie has brought us much closer together, and we feel like relations between Stan and ourselves have never been better. God bless you, Stan Lee. God bless you."

Not all of the major companies are having such huge success with licences at the moment, though. Dark Horse were hoping to follow the lead set by Marvel when they

Marvel and Stan - all lovey dovey

sold the film rights to Spider-Man, but have met with little interest from Hollywood. "We just don't get it," a Dark Horse spokesperson told us yesterday. "No-one seems to want to make films about our most popular comics. No matter how hard we try, we just can't seem to sell the rights to **Alien**, **The Terminator** or even **Star Wars**. Weird, eh?" Apparently plans for a TV series based on Dark Horse's popular **Buffy The Vampire Slayer** comic have also come to nothing.

DROOPY PRESSO

IN other news, a typing error on his website recently caused Grant Morrison to declare himself "Bigger than Dog." Apparently the message was removed after furious complaints from the Kennel Club.

Also... be kind to kittens, don't have a wank!